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An Evening in Support of the Bahais of Iran

Abbas Milani's speech at the Herbst Theater in San Francisco.

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This Tuesday, seven leaders of Iran's Bahai movement will go on trial on capital charges of espionage and threatening national security. They have been in prison for more than a year. The group's two lawyers have not only been refused the legally required visits with their clients, but neither will be in court on Tuesday. One, Abdulfattah Sultani, is in prison on charges of participating in the "Velvet Revolution," while the other, the Nobel Laureate Shirin Ebadi, stands accused by the regime of participating in the same "conspiracy"--but has been fortunately traveling in the West.

For the last few weeks, all around the world, there have been meetings in support of the Bahai Seven in Iran. And last Wednesday, at the San Francisco Herbst Theater, where the meeting to draft the declaration of Human Rights was once convened, a delightfully multi-ethnic, multi-faith group came to show their concern for the fate of the Bahai Seven and solidarity with the 300,000 Bahais who still live in Iran. Ross Mirkarimi, an Iranian-American member of the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, was among the political leaders who spoke at the gathering. The president of the University of San Francisco offered a few words of prayer to begin the meeting. Here is the text of the talk I gave on that night. I am not a member of the Bahai faith, and like many in the hall, I was there in solidarity with a much persecuted religious minority in Iran.

My name is Abbas Milani, and I stand here as an Iranian contrite and resolute--ashamed for what I consider Iran's disgraceful past in our treatment of our Bahai citizens, and resolute in my determination to say, *Never Again, And Never More.*

Pogroms were a fact of life in 19th century European Anti-Semitism. In the 20th century they begot the Holocaust. In Iran, there have never been more than a handful of murderous pogroms. But by the 19th century, Iranian Anti-Semites had turned a kind of psychological, emotional pogrom into a sinister art, and tragically, all the subtle and crude techniques of this persecution were turned against members of the Bahai faith, the new bane of Shiite zealots.

One can certainly understand why Shiism, and its belief that its prophet ends the prophetic line, and that the Messiah that must come is none other than its twelfth Imam, might have profound theological tensions with the Bahai faith. But it is a singular requirement of civility in our modern world that we no longer try to solve our theological difference at the point of a gun, or the end of a whip.

But there is also another reason for the obsessive zeal of many Shiites in fighting the Bahai faith. The Bahai's message of peace in contrast to the Islamists' increasing use of violence; the Bahai's promise of gender equality in contrast to a faith where misogyny has long been a way of life; and finally the Bahai's almost Jeffersonian devotion to the principle that in matters of faith there must be neither coercion, nor acceptance by happenstance of birth, but that children born to Bahai parents should at the moment of maturity decide for themselves their own faith in contrast to a state religion that mandates conversion a capital crime, punishable by death--all combine to create a glaring set of contrasts that render traditional Shiism sclerotic. In comparison, their nemesis faith is a harbinger of modernity and its incumbent reformation--a reformation wherein faith is a private matter between men and women and their own notions of the sacred.

Cultures and societies, no less than individuals, are differentiated by how they reckon with what is shameful in their past. Some prefer the false comfort of ignorance. Others are stubbornly obdurate about even accepting the fact that there is something shameful, and still a third group continues to practice and pursue, often with renewed vigor, the very practices and policies that necessitated repentance in the first place. Democratic societies, like healthy individuals, perpetually and critically contemplate their past, uncovering dark moments of injustice or inequity, and moving to end or amend them. For Iran, the treatment of the Bahais in the last 150 years, our society's acts of omission and commission, what we said and did or failed to say and do, all create an embarrassing blot of shame on our history. Iran can't become a democracy unless it has had a full reckoning with its Bahai problem. Iran can't be a democracy unless the Bahais are

considered full citizens of the society and their faith--like those of Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians, Muslims, or members of any other faith, belief, or even disbelief-- is recognized as a private matter where the state, social institutions, or actors have no right of inquiry, interference, or harassment.

Sadly in our society, as has often happened in the past, one step forward is often, even invariably, followed by two steps back. If Qajar kings reveled in torturing the first generation of converts to Bab; if even the great reformist chancellor of the age, Amir Kabir, spoke to the new converts not in the language of the liberal constitution he so coveted but in the brutal manners of the oriental potentates he so despised; if even the early 20th century Iranian advocates of democratic constitutionalism suddenly forfeited their fervor for equality when it came to granting it to the Bahais of Iran--but a change of some significance happened during the Pahlavi era, particularly during the 37 year rule of Mohammad Reza Shah.

In this period, Iran began to accept the rights of citizenship for Bahais of the country. The relative safe harbor provided by the Pahlavi kings unleashed an impressive burst of creative, industrial, commercial, and intellectual energies and innovations by members of the Bahai community. In writing *Eminent Persians*--two volumes devoted to the lives of 150 of the country's innovators and industrialists--I was pleasantly surprised at how many of them were members of the Bahai faith. Iran's biggest home appliance industry--more specifically the pioneering work of the Arj Group--the introduction of Pepsi Cola and television by Habib Sabaet, the advent of child and family psychology by Dr. Rasekh, who had been a student of no less a giant than Piaget--are all examples of the immense contribution of members of the Bahai community to Iran's modern development. The Shahyad Arch and Square, now renamed incongruously Azadi or Freedom Square, was the work of a Bahai architect--a young man just out of college who surmounted incredible odds and obstacles to win the biggest architectural competition of his generation. Even after 30 years, the Islamic regime has not succeeded in supplanting this majestic structure, imbued with elements of Iran's hybrid and only partially Islamic culture, as the symbol of Tehran.

And the Bahais accomplished all of this, and much more in spite of constant pressure by the clergy, demanding stricter pressures, even punishments, for members of the community. In 1955 Ayatollah Boroujerdi, the highest Shiite Ayatollah at the time, virtually blackmailed the Shah into organizing the shameful attack on Bahai houses of worship.

Around this time, a nefarious group of Shiite zealots was founded by a clergy named Roghani. The group called itself Hojjatiyeh and it was formed for the specific purpose of parlaying their members' pieties, and their fervent devotion to the twelfth Imam, the Mahdi, into a ruthless obsession against the Bahais. The Hojjatiyeh zealots went so far as to infiltrate Bahai circles only to learn the identities of the members. They became a ruthless force of containment and surveillance of the Bahais under the Shah and a merciless arm of enforcement against members of the faith after the 1979 revolution. On the eve of that revolution, the knowledge the Hojjatiyyeh had so meticulously and unscrupulously gathered over the decades was used to put pressure on members of the faith to either renounce their faith--or in the parlance of the clergy, give up their complicity with a force so sinister that must not be named by its own name but only referred to as that "sinister sect" (*Fergeyeh Zalle*)--or suffer heartbreaking, and sometimes life-ending consequences. Thousands of Bahais at the time lost their lifetime pensions, houses, businesses and did not submit to the regime's bullying tactic. Today, seven of the leaders of this determined community stand to be tried for "Spreading corruption on Earth" and for being "agents of Zionism," nefarious charges that could each carry the death sentence.

Today, 30 years after the relative enlightenment of the Shah's policies on religious freedom for Bahais and for Jews, a man calls himself Iran's president who long ago learnt his anti-Bahai fervor at the foot of one of his spiritual gurus--Mesbah-Yazdi, the de facto current leader of the "Sinister Sect" Hojjatiye. The marked increase in persecution of the Bahais--persecution that in its scope bears some resemblance to the Racial Laws initially passed in Nazi Germany in 1935--is the direct result of this infamous group's ascent.

But not all is gloom and doom. In spite of the concentrated efforts of the regime to poison the minds of the Iranian people about the Bahai faith, in spite of its monopoly hold on the media, there is a new surging consciousness amongst millions of Iranians, dozens of intellectuals, and even a handful of Shiite clerics that the treatment of Bahais has been a shameful part of our past. More and more people are convinced that Bahais have, like any other Iranian citizen, the inalienable right to practice their faith, and that as citizens of Iran, they should be entitled to all the rights allotted to any other citizen, from any faith. An impressively large number of Iranian writers, poets, scholars, and filmmakers have come to recognize that as a nation, we owe the Bahais a word of apology, and a debt of gratitude. Apology for all they have suffered, and apology for all our silences; and gratitude that in spite of these inequities, they have invariably abided by the civility and peacefulness their faith professes, but they have never wavered in their love of a free, democratic Iran. From *Encyclopedia Iranica* and the tireless work of Professor Yarshater to the brilliant scholarship of professors Banani and Moayyed, they have stood in the vanguard of the effort to show the world that there is an Iran different from the zealotry, bigotry, and brutality of its current rulers--an Iran of

Neda Agha Sultans and Goratol-Ayns, the 19th century early convert to Bab, a great poet and scholar and the first woman to lift her veil and give a public lecture in Iran. Let this evening then be the beginning of a new national covenant: *Never Again, Never More, Never in the Name of Iran.*

Abbas Milani is the Hamid and Christina Moghadam Director of Iranian Studies at Stanford, where he is the co-director of the Iran Democracy Project. His latest book is Eminent Persian: The Men and Women who Made Modern Iran, 1941-1979 (Syracuse University Press).

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