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## Teaching Iran a lesson on faith

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BY ELIZABETH LANDAU

Long before he became a student at Princeton University, Pedram Roushan diligently studied civil engineering in a musty old house in Tehran, with paper-covered windows used as blackboards.

Pedram and his classmates in Tehran could not gain admission to any of Iran's "official" universities because of their religion, so they made the most of what was available to them: an underground education.

For Pedram, it was an unconventional but necessary way to gain the knowledge he needed for graduate work and to start a career in the field of his dreams.

Baha'is, numbering 300,000 in Iran and 5 million worldwide, have faced persecution in Iran since the religion's inception as a reformist movement in 1844. Baha'is stress equality of the sexes, the brotherhood of all peoples and pacifism, and in Iran they are regarded as heretics. The persecution heightened after the 1979 revolution, when Baha'is were denied access to higher education and government jobs.

In response, Baha'is established the underground Baha'i Institute of Higher Education (BIHE) in 1987 so Baha'is could get college training in Iran.

"The teachings of the Baha'i faith, which promote education, independent investigation of truth, equality of the genders and other progressive values, pose a threat to authoritarian non-secular government," Roushan said. "The Baha'i faith ... is a peaceful religion which seeks unity of humanity."

Like Roushan, several BIHE alumni have come to the United States seeking master's and doctoral degrees, but they have not forgotten the persecution they left behind. Now they are speaking out about their experiences and encouraging people to take a stand on the issue.

Princeton University President Shirley Tilghman, inspired by Roushan and Princeton graduate student Dessi Dimitrova, recently wrote a letter expressing her "dismay" to Mohammad Javad Zarif, Iran's representative to the United Nations, and asking that "forceful steps be taken to halt the systematic discrimination and harassment to which Baha'is are subject in Iran."

Surely, she said, Zarif can appreciate the role of higher education in broadening young minds from different backgrounds, since he himself received his postsecondary education in the United States.

Copies of Tilghman's letter were sent to Kofi Annan, U.N. secretary-general, and Louise Arbour, U.N. high commissioner for human rights.

BIHE made international news in 1998 when Iranian government agents launched raids against Baha'is. Iranian agents arrested faculty and staff, and told detainees to sign a document saying that institute no longer existed.

"They (The Revolutionary Guard) attacked Baha'is' houses and took all the computers, all the documents, all the certificates," said Pania Meshgin, who attended BIHE before coming to the United States about 2 1/2 years ago. "It was clear there was a systematic plan for annihilating BIHE -- they were so organized, they knew everything, everyone's schedule."

Despite the attacks, BIHE education efforts have continued. Meshgin said she knows classes are still in session, but she can't ask anyone in Iran how the institute operates.

"Since the revolution they control all the Baha'is' phones," she said. "I only ask, 'Everything is fine? Yes or No?'"

## **IT BEGINS WITH EXAMS**

Roushan said that when Baha'is take regular Iranian university entrance exams today, they are required to state their religious affiliation, and are confronted with four options

for religion, none of which is "Baha'i." If they leave the question blank, they must take their exams with a name tag that states they are Muslim, which they are not. Baha'is do accept Muhammad as a prophet, but some refuse to declare themselves Muslim in order to take an exam.

Afshin Mohammad Avali, who received a civil engineering degree from BIHE, recalls getting expelled from elementary school because he was Baha'i, and then getting denied readmission to that school later. When he graduated high school, he faced rejections from universities at least twice. "They said, 'You do not qualify,'" he said.

Now in Maryland, he works for a civil engineering firm, a job difficult for a Baha'i to land in Iran. Even private firms, particularly those that work or have contracts with the government, are wary of Baha'is.

"At private firms, when they find out you are Baha'i, they fire you," he said. "They're really afraid."

When asked about the persecution of Baha'is in Iran, a representative of the Iranian Embassy in Washington, D.C., asked, "Who told you this? There is no problem with Baha'is getting passports; They go to Iran and come back with no problem," he said. About the BIHE, he said, "No comment."

Mojgan, Pedram's wife, a former BIHE pharmacy student now living in Princeton, remembers that her father couldn't find work commensurate with his skills, despite his degree in physics. Her mother was fired from a hospital after the revolution in 1979.

During the attacks of the Revolutionary Guard in 1982, government agents attacked her family's house, arrested her grandfather, and took the family's personal items, even the photo albums, she said.

Pania Meshgin, a master's degree student at the University of New Mexico, remembers the fear of being seen in public with members of the opposite sex. Civil laws in Iran now do allow men and women, regardless of religion, to interact with each other in public or private if they are not related.

When she was 22, Meshgin and two male classmates were arrested for riding in the same car together after their final exam at BIHE.

"They put me in jail with people who did crimes, who did worse things," she said. "No one believed me (about) why I was there."

Meshgin recalls hoping that such practices would be relaxed whenever the Iranian government declared the country "free." But after two months, men and women couldn't be seen together unless they were relatives.

## **BARRIERS TO EDUCATION**

The Hebrew Immigration Aid Society helped BIHE alumni like Meshgin, and Pedram and Mojgan Roushan, come to the United States as refugees to pursue higher education. But when graduate programs asked them for undergraduate transcripts, they had no record of their underground education.

"I had to start a bachelor's degree from scratch," said Pedram, now a doctoral student in physics at Princeton.

Meshgin's case was not so extreme, but she did have to go through two semesters of non-degree coursework at the University of New Mexico before beginning a graduate program. Her courses at BIHE in civil engineering prepared her well, she said; in fact, her second semester was a breeze because she had already studied some of the material.

Beyond the education itself, Pedram emphasized his appreciation for the philosophy of BIHE, and for the teachers who volunteered to make it happen.

"What we got was a vision for higher education, praised knowledge for the sake of knowledge," he said. "The sacrifice the faculty and staff make inspires my classmates who come to the U.S. to pursue more education."

Though Dessi Dimitrova is from Bulgaria, she said she became involved in activism about the Baha'i situation in Iran because she values faith and education.

"Having grown up under communism, I can relate to the difficulty of living in a society that denies its citizens the right to religious freedom," she said. "In the case of the Baha'i in Iran, however, the denial of religious expression is coupled with so many other violations of human rights, especially the right to education."

Dimitrova, who periodically hosts Baha'i devotional meetings in Princeton, estimates there are about 10 to 12 Baha'is in the Princeton area. She communicates with Baha'i students across the country and in Bulgaria who are also trying to raise awareness about the persecution in Iran.

Students at MIT and Stanford have also approached their college presidents about the issue, she said.

"It would be most helpful if the U.S. government also spoke out on this issue, but this seems unlikely to occur at the moment, with potential for nuclear proliferation in Iran a pressing issue of foreign policy between our countries," Tilghman said.