



## DEBATE PACK

CDP 062 (2021) | 19 April 2021

# Land rights for religious minorities including Baha'is in Iran

Westminster Hall

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1.30pm to 3.00pm

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# 1. Background

Iran has been an Islamic republic since 1979, when the previous, pro-Western regime was overthrown. The constitution stipulates Shia Islam to be the official religion and that the official interpretation of Sharia law is the basis of the legal system. The constitution does set out Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians (excluding converts from Islam) as being accepted religious minorities although in practice they, along with other religious minorities, are widely suppressed.

One such minority is the 350,000-strong community of Baha'is, who form Iran's largest non-Muslim religious minority. The Baha'i faith is not recognised in the Iranian constitution and Baha'is are considered to be "unprotected infidels" according to the [2019 annual report of the UN Special Rapporteur to Iran](#). As such they have been a particular target for repression, persecution and victimisation over the last 40 years. Hundreds have been executed or imprisoned for their religious beliefs. Baha'is may not establish places of worship, schools, or any independent religious associations and are denied the right to higher education and prevented from finding work. They are barred from the military and denied public sector jobs and pensions. They are subject to arbitrary shop closures, unfair dismissal from employment and the confiscation of businesses, property and land. They also have no right to inherit property and the government does not recognise Baha'i marriages.

In recent years, Baha'is in Iran have faced increasingly harsh treatment. Attacks on private homes, businesses, and personal and community property are reported to be increasing. Baha'i cemeteries have also been desecrated and seized. In January 2021, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Javaid Rehman, published a [report](#) outlining current human rights concerns in the country.

Among other issues, the Special Rapporteur noted deep concern that discrimination against ethnic and religious minorities persists, including forced evictions and land confiscation in minority areas. In 2020 hundreds of people were reportedly arrested for resisting land confiscation and house demolitions, despite presenting evidence of ownership. The report notes that in November 2020 over 100 Iranian security agents undertook raids, without cause, against Baha'is, reportedly demanding deeds and confiscating items.

This has led to longer term fears of the widespread and unlawful seizure of Baha'i owned property. In a [statement to the UN Human Rights Council](#) in March 2021, Javaid Rehman, stated:

I am disturbed at the harassment, arbitrary arrests and imprisonments of religious minorities, particularly members of the Baha'i faith who have experienced a new wave of house raids and land confiscations in recent months.

A [global campaign](#) calling for the end to the persecution of the Baha'is and the return of ancestral lands that were confiscated by an Iranian constitutional court in August 2020, has also been gaining international support in the last few months.

## 2. Press articles

The following is a selection of press and media articles relevant to this debate.

Please note: the Library is not responsible for either the views or accuracy of external content.

**[Baha'i in Iran — repressed and persecuted by the state](#)**

Deutsche Welle  
8 March 2021

**[Unprecedented reaction makes voice of persecuted Bahá'ís in an Iranian village global](#)**

Iran Press Watch  
7 March 2021

**[Baha'is in Ivel, Iran, Have No Right to Property](#)**

Iran Press Watch  
10 February 2021

**[Home raids across Iran indicate alarming increase in human rights violations against Baha'is, says Baha'i International Community](#)**

Bahá'í International Community  
30 November 2020

**[Persecution of Iran's Baha'is ramped up: threats to "uproot", prison sentences and psychological pressures](#)**

Global News Wire  
10 June 2020

**[Iran's ongoing war against its religious minorities](#)**

Open Democracy  
Haidar Khezri  
24 February 2020

**[Unrecognized Minorities in Iran Must Now Hide Religion to Obtain Crucial Government ID](#)**

Center for Human Rights in Iran  
27 January 2020

**[Who are the Baha'is and why are they so persecuted?](#)**

The Conversation  
Zackery M. Heern  
1 December 2017

**[Khamenei controls massive financial empire built on property seizures](#)**

Reuters  
Steve Stecklow, Babak Dehghanpisheh and Yeganeh Torbati  
11 November 2013

### 3. Press releases

#### [Iran: Leaked document reveals plans to intensify suppression of Baha'is and other religious minorities](#)

**International Federation for Human Rights**

**9 March 2021**

The League for the Defence of Human Rights in Iran (LDDHI) has received a copy of the [minutes](#) of a "top confidential" meeting held on 21 September 2020 in the city of Sari, Mazandaran Province, during which a high-level government commission decided to significantly increase the repression of religious minorities not recognised by the Islamic Republic's Constitution, in particular the Baha'is.

The 13 October 2020 expropriation of 27 Baha'i farming families in Ivel Village, which falls under the administration of the city of Sari, might have been one immediate outcome of this meeting.

According to the minutes of the meeting, the Commission on Ethnicities, Sects and Religions in Sari was attended by representatives of 19 various governmental security and Intelligence organisations and aimed "to review the latest status of the Dervishes and the subversive Baha'i sect."

The meeting concluded with an agreement "to rigorously control the movements of the subversive Baha'i sect and the Dervishes" and "to adopt a detailed plan in regard to cultural and educational institutions."

Furthermore, the participants took the decision to control all activities of the Baha'i community, and to instruct education officials to "identify and oversee" Baha'i students, and to "bring them back" to Islam.

"These measures reflect the Iranian government's intensifying persecution against followers of the Baha'i faith. In contravention of Iran's international legal obligations, the authorities consider them heretics, ban their religion, and view the practice of the Baha'i faith as a subversive act," said LDDHI president and FIDH Honorary President Karim Lahidji.

LDDHI and FIDH call on the international community to urge Iranian officials, in bilateral and multilateral meetings, to respect the right to freedom of religion or belief in Iran, in accordance with the country's legal obligations under Article 18 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), to which Iran is a state party.

#### **Background**

The Baha'i faith is not recognised under the Iranian Constitution. Over 200 of its followers were executed after the 1979 Islamic revolution, while others were assassinated. Its followers are persecuted, arrested, frequently face judicial harassment and unfair prosecution, and are occasionally victims of extrajudicial killings [1], because of their faith.

Followers of the Baha'i faith are deprived of higher education, and persecuted in schools. They are prohibited from seeking employment in

the public sector and their private businesses are subject to various types of unfair legal pressure and brutal administrative closures. In addition, private companies that employ Baha'is face great pressure from the authorities.

### [UK joins international community in calls to stop persecution of Baha'is in Ivel, Iran](#)

**UK Baha'i Office of Public Affairs  
16 February 2021**

The Baha'is of Iran have attracted support from the UK and officials across the globe in response to Iranian authorities confiscating Baha'i owned land on religious grounds.

Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Minister of State Foreign Commonwealth & Development Affairs, had added his voice to the chorus of voices expressing concern at the treatment of the Baha'is.

In a [tweet](#), he said: "The UK is deeply concerned by reports of expropriation & repossession of land owned by Baha'i communities in Ivel. This follows a worrying escalation in long-standing persecution against religious minorities in Iran. We will always stand up for people of all faiths & beliefs."

Shaykh Ibrahim Mogra, Imam of Leicester and Chair of the Virtue Ethics Foundation, also released a [statement](#). In it he said:

"I am greatly alarmed to learn about the prejudicial ruling of two courts in the Islamic Republic of Iran confiscating land belonging to the Baha'is in the rural village of Ivel

[...]

Islam does not permit a government to confiscate land from citizens just because they follow a different religion or ideology [...] the verdicts must be confronted and overturned."

In a final ruling in October 2020, two courts in Iran used Article 49 of the Iranian constitution to justify the seizure of farmland belonging to the Baha'is in Ivel, a village in the north of Iran. The confiscations, which have occurred solely on religious grounds, have left dozens of families internally displaced and economically impoverished.

The Baha'is' lawyers were given no opportunity to see court documents to prepare a defence or to present any arguments. This case could set an alarming precedent in nullifying Baha'is' right to ownership of land.

This is the latest in a pattern of persecution for the Baha'is in Ivel. The community has experienced attacks on their properties, arson, imprisonment, and expulsion. [Numerous official documents](#) reveal religious prejudice as the motive behind land confiscations. Some records show that Baha'is have been told their properties would be returned if they convert to Islam.

Others across the world have supported the Baha'is in Ivel. The former Canadian Prime Minister, Brian Mulroney, is among a group of more than 50 high-ranking legal professionals who have written an [open](#)

[letter](#) to Iran's Chief Justice, Ibrahim Raisi. The letter condemns the court ruling to confiscate Baha'i properties in Ivel, and the "new and intense" violations against the Baha'i community.

"Under the current Iranian government, Baha'is have experienced home raids, attacks on properties, confiscation of possessions, dismissals from employment, denial of access to higher education, imprisonment, and execution. Baha'is have sought legal remedies, but to little avail." The letter states.

It goes on: "The 2020 rulings now establish a dangerous constitutional precedent of judicially sanctioned confiscation that nullifies legitimate property interests based only on the owners' religious affiliation, thus departing not only from international human rights standards but also from the text and intent of the Iranian constitution itself."

Germany's Federal Government Commissioner for Global Freedom of Religion issued a [press release](#) calling on the Iranian government "to recognise the Baha'is as a religious community and respect the rights of all religions". Officials, including politicians, from [Brazil](#), [Sweden](#), and [Canada](#) have also expressed their support for the Baha'is in Ivel.

## 4. PQs

### [Iran: Religious Freedom](#)

01 Apr 2021 | 174302

**Asked by: Imran Ahmad Khan**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what recent steps his Department has taken to support freedom of religion in Iran.

**Answering member: James Cleverly | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

The UK is committed to defending freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) for all, and promoting respect between different religious and non-religious communities. Promoting the right to FoRB is one of the UK's longstanding human rights priorities.

The Baha'i community in Iran continue to be systematically discriminated against, harassed, and targeted. We have repeatedly raised these persistent human rights violations with Iran. On 9 March, at the latest session of the UN Human Rights Council, the UK called on Iran to end the discrimination and persecution of religious minorities, particularly towards the Baha'i and Christian converts. Lord Ahmad made a statement on 12 February, criticising the persecution against religious minorities in Iran, particularly focusing on expropriation of Baha'i-owned land. The UK fully backs renewing the mandate of the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, so he can examine these issues further.

The minister responsible for human rights, Lord (Tariq) Ahmad of Wimbledon, made the UK's commitment to FoRB for all clear in a number of international meetings in November 2020. On 16 November 2020, he virtually attended the ministerial meeting to advance Freedom of Religion or Belief in Warsaw and reaffirmed the UK's commitment to promoting FoRB, particularly during the pandemic. He also reaffirmed the UK's commitment to promoting FoRB for all at the ministers' forum of the International Religious Freedom or Belief Alliance in the same month. On 20 December 2020, the Prime Minister appointed Fiona Bruce MP as his special envoy for FoRB. Mrs Bruce represents the UK at meetings of the alliance, who work to advocate for the rights of individuals being discriminated against or persecuted on the basis of their faith or belief.

### [Iran: Baha'i Faith](#)

26 Jan 2021 | 138888

**Asked by: Mr Alistair Carmichael**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, what representations his Department has received on the judgments of Branch 54 of the Special Court for Article 49 of the Constitution, issued on 1 August 2020 and a further extraordinary session of the Court of Appeal on 13 October 2020, on the

expropriation of properties and farms owned by a community of Bahá'is in the village of Ivel; and if he will make a statement.

**Answering member: James Cleverly | Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office**

We remain deeply concerned by the continuing systematic discrimination, harassment and targeting of the Baha'i community in Iran. On 26 October 2020, we made a statement calling on Iran to ensure members of all religious and ethnic groups are treated equally before the law and allowed to participate fully in society. We support the assessment made by the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in Iran, that discrimination against the Baha'is is sanctioned by a lack of constitutional recognition. The Government continues to raise our concerns on this and other persistent human rights violations with Iran, and maintains close engagement with the Baha'i community.

**[Iran: Identity Cards](#)**

**12 Mar 2020 | 26142**

**Asked by: Bob Blackman**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, what representations he has received on the (a) access to fundamental rights of Iranian citizens who do not have a new digitised ID card and (b) effect of that new system on (i) members of the Baha'i community and (ii) others not recognised under the 1979 constitution; and if he will make a statement.

**Answering member: James Cleverly | Foreign and Commonwealth Office**

We are aware of reports that Iran's Baha'i community are being prevented from obtaining identity cards under new rules, depriving them of accessing many basic services. We remain concerned about the continued harassment and mistreatment that the Baha'i and other minority religious groups face. We support the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Iran's assessment that discrimination against the Baha'is in Iran is sanctioned by a lack of constitutional recognition. We regularly call upon Iran to cease harassment of all religious minorities and to fulfil its international and domestic obligations to protect freedom of religion or belief to all Iranians.

**[Iran: Baha'i Faith](#)**

**04 Mar 2020 | HL1834**

**Asked by: Baroness Whitaker**

To ask Her Majesty's Government what assessment they have made of reports that Iran's Baha'i minority are being prevented from obtaining identity cards under new rules, thereby depriving them of basic civil rights.

**Answering member: Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon | Foreign and Commonwealth Office**

We are aware of reports that Iran's Baha'i community are being prevented from obtaining identity cards under new rules, depriving them of accessing many basic services. We remain concerned about the continued harassment and mistreatment that the Baha'i and other minority religious groups face. We support the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights in Iran's assessment that discrimination against the Baha'is in Iran is sanctioned by a lack of constitutional recognition. We regularly call upon Iran to cease harassment of all religious minorities and to fulfil its international and domestic obligations to protect freedom of religion or belief to all Iranians.

**[Iran: Baha'i Faith](#)**

**23 Jul 2019 | 277106**

**Asked by: Dr David Drew**

To ask the Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, what reports his Department has received on trends in the level of Tazir laws in Iran in relation to the (a) arbitrary punishment, (b) imprisonment and (c) internal exile of members of the Baha'i community in that country; and if he will make a statement.

**Answering member: Dr Andrew Murrison | Foreign and Commonwealth Office**

We are aware of reports about the continued harassment and mistreatment that the Baha'i and other minority groups face. We support the assessment of the UN Special Rapporteur on the Situation of Human Rights that discrimination against the Baha'is in Iran is sanctioned by a lack of constitutional recognition and the absence of other legal protections for adherents of this faith. We regularly call upon Iran to cease harassment of all religious minorities and to fulfil its international and domestic obligations to protect freedom of religion or belief.

## 5. Early Day Motions

### [Pressures on Baha'is in Mazandaran](#)

**EDM 1727 (session 2019-21)**

**13 April 2021**

**Mr Alistair Carmichael**

That this House notes a report of 9 March 2021 by Federation International des Ligues de Droits de L'Homme alerting the world to increased pressures on Baha'is in the province of Mazandaran, Iran; further notes the text of a directive from the Commission on Ethnicities, Sects and Religions in the town of Sari, Mazandaran, dated September 2020; observes that this directive mandates authorities to identify Baha'is students in order to bring them to Islam and to further suppress Baha'i economic activity; and urges the Government to make representations to the Iranian authorities on this matter.

### [Baha'i land in Iran](#)

**EDM 1487 (session 2019-21)**

**10 February 2021**

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle**

That this House notes the judgment of Branch 54 of the Special Court for Article 49 of the Constitution in Iran, issued on 1 August 2020 and a further extraordinary session of the Court of Appeal on 13 October 2020 in the case of properties and farms belonging to a community of Baha'is; further notes the effect of these judgments appears to finalise the expropriation of lands that Baha'is have farmed for nearly 150 years; observes that Baha'i rights can be dismissed though their omission from the Constitution; and calls on the UK Government to make urgent representations to the Iranian authorities to prevent the dispossession of this law-abiding religious community.

### [Baha'i community in Iran](#)

**EDM 617 (session 2019-21)**

**16 June 2020**

**Mr Virendra Sharma**

That this House notes reports of the arrest of 71 members of the Baha'i community in Iran and that 29 of those members have now been imprisoned; further notes concerns have been expressed by UN experts about the heightened risk to health from the covid-19 virus to those in Iranian penal facilities; and calls on the UK government to urge the Iranian authorities to show clemency and release those detained Baha'is.

**Freedom of religious belief in Iran**

**EDM 209 (session 2019-21)**

**24 February 2020**

**Mary Glendon**

That this House notes the increasing importance of defence of freedom of religion of belief in UK foreign policy; further notes the arrest of 24 members of the Baha'i faith in Iran in October and November 2019; and calls on the Government to press Iranian authorities to cease its targeting of Baha'is and other religious minorities on account of their beliefs.

## 6. Further reading

[Situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran: Report of the Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Islamic Republic of Iran, Javaid Rehman](#), Human Rights Council, Forty-sixth session, 22 February–19 March 2021

[It's Their Land](#) (YouTube), Bahá'í International Community, 21 February 2021

[UK Baha'i Office of Public Affairs](#) (Website)

[Bahá'í International Community](#) (Website)

[Archives of Baha'I Persecution in Iran](#) (Website)

[Iran Press Watch](#) (Website)

[Center for Human Rights In Iran](#) (Website)

Amnesty International: [Iran](#)

Human Rights Watch: [Iran](#)

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