

A NOTE ON THE NUMBERS OF BABI AND BAHAI MARTYRS IN IRAN

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Peter Smith's excellent short article on the problem of determining the size of the Iranian Babi and Baha'i populations in Iran (Bulletin 1:4) prompts me to examine in some detail a related problem which has hitherto received little attention, namely the numbers of Babis and Baha'is killed there. The problem is one of some importance at the moment, in view of the current Baha'i situation in Iran, since much attention is being paid to the question of how far the persecution of Baha'is under the Islamic Republic represents a fresh departure and how far a continuation of earlier attitudes and actions. As I propose to demonstrate, the figures quoted in various Baha'i publications for the numbers of martyrs (whether Babis, Baha'is, or Babis and Baha'is together) tend to exhibit extreme confusion, but I suspect that this confusion has, in fact, penetrated only the thinking of a small number of those who look twice at information presented to them. The result is, I think, unfortunate in a number of ways, since it has, in particular, led to an exaggeration of the historical dimension of the problem of ongoing persecution and encouraged unclear and perhaps even dangerous thinking about the subject. This will, I hope, become clearer once I have gone over the facts at our disposal. Let me begin by looking at what information we possess as to the actual numbers of martyrs.

As far I can estimate, the number of Babis killed during the main clashes between them and government forces between 1848 and 1850 was not very high. Baha'i sources speak of the involvement of from 540 to 600 individuals on the Babi side at Shaykh Tabarsi, of whom some 300 were actually killed or died from illness or other causes in the course of the siege.<sup>1</sup> Estimates of the numbers of Babis who took part in the Nayriz fighting of 1850 vary a great deal,<sup>2</sup> but a figure of almost one thousand (1,000) would, I think, be about right,<sup>3</sup> of whom rather less than 500 were killed in the struggle or afterwards.<sup>4</sup> Zarandi states that a total of about 350 Babis died during or after the Nayriz disturbances of 1853.<sup>5</sup> Larger numbers than these were involved in the Zanjan episode from 1850 to 1851, and between one thousand (1,000) and one thousand eight hundred (1,800) of these were put to death.<sup>6</sup>

The Tehran executions of 1852, following the attempt on the life of the Shah, claimed the lives of only about 37 known individuals.<sup>7</sup> The total number of Babis put to death in Tehran between 1847 and 1863 amounted to no more than 62.<sup>8</sup> Even when we add to the above numbers the figures for Babis killed in isolated incidents during this period (which cannot amount to more than a few dozen all told -- higher numbers would introduce the problem of major incidents going completely unrecorded by either side), we are left with a total of little more than three thousand (3,000) at the outside or, if we take the lower figure for the numbers involved at Zanjan, just over two thousand (2,000) altogether.

There are difficulties in computing the numbers of Baha'is killed in Iran from the 1860's through to the present day. Most deaths occurred in small-scale outbreaks of violence involving most often only one or two individuals. There were no further incidents comparable to those which characterized the later Babi period. As far as I can tell, by adding together the figures for all the separate incidents, it would be accurate to speak of about 300 in all.<sup>9</sup>

When, however, we turn to statements in Baha'i publications about the total number of martyrs, the accuracy of references to individual incidents is replaced by widely inaccurate and diverging figures. The normal tendency is to make use of a single, rounded figure (usually 20,000). This is sometimes applied to the entire Babi-Baha'i period, at other times to the Babi period alone. Naturally, the common Baha'i practice of conflating Babism and Baha'ism into a single phenomenon (usually referred to as 'the Faith') tends to blur distinctions and to make references to figures somewhat vague. Thus, for example, it is often implied (but not stated) that a figure such as 20,000 applies to the Babi-Baha'i movement as a whole, but that the majority of martyrdoms took place in the Babi period. At other times, however, it seems to be suggested that the numbers of martyrs were fairly evenly distributed

between the two periods.

The earliest 'official' figure known to me is that of 'more than four thousand' given by 'Abd al-Baha' as the number of Babis killed in 1266 and 1267 (1850-1851), following the death of the Bab.<sup>10</sup> 'Abbas Effendi also spoke of 20,000 Babi martyrs in all as early as 1871<sup>11</sup>, but in his later writings and talks he became extremely inconsistent on the issue. Thus, he gives alternative figures of 'thousands',<sup>12</sup> 'twenty thousand',<sup>13</sup> 'more than 20,000',<sup>14</sup> and 'twenty or thirty thousand'<sup>15</sup> martyrs in all (Babis and Baha'is to the time of writing). Elsewhere, he refers to 'ten thousand, possibly twenty thousand'<sup>16</sup> or 'over twenty thousand'<sup>17</sup> Babi martyrs alone. It is somewhat unclear what he means when he speaks of 'twenty thousand Baha'is' killed in the reign of Nasir al-Din Shah (1848-1896).<sup>18</sup>

There are examples of similar confusion in other Baha'i references to martyr numbers made during this period. In 1911, Amin Farid spoke of 'hundreds' of Babi martyrs,<sup>19</sup> and Diya' Allah Baghdadi referred seven years later to '24,000 or more' Babi and Baha'i martyrs together (adding the figure of 4,000 from Traveller's Narrative to the more popular figure of 20,000?).<sup>20</sup>

In view of his general eagerness to systematize, it might have been expected that Shoghi Effendi would have made some effort to reduce this confusion to some order, but he also seems to have been unable to make up his mind as to what was the correct figure. At the beginning of God Passes By, he refers to 'above ten thousand' martyrs during the first nine years of the Babi period,<sup>21</sup> while, towards the end, he speaks of 'a world community (i.e. the Baha'i community of 1944)... consecrated by the sacrifice of no less than twenty thousand martyrs'.<sup>22</sup> This would seem to imply that Shoghi Effendi thought there had been ten thousand Babi martyrs followed by a further ten thousand Baha'is: it certainly has the element of symmetry that would have appealed to his orderly mind. Nevertheless, he himself contradicts such a conclusion when he writes of 'twenty thousand of his (i.e. the Bab's) followers' being put to death<sup>23</sup> or, in the opposite sense, when he translates 'Abd al-Baha's reference to 'thousands' who had 'shed streams of their sacred blood in this path' (i.e. overall) by the phrase 'ten thousand souls'.<sup>24</sup>

The broad consensus of Baha'i writing since Shoghi Effendi has favoured the figure of twenty thousand, although there is evidently great confusion as to what it includes. Thus, we read of around 20,000 martyrs 'during the lifetimes of the Bab and Baha'u'llah',<sup>25</sup> or 'in the Heroic Age of His (i.e. Baha' Allah's) Cause',<sup>26</sup> or simply for 'the Baha'i Faith',<sup>27</sup> or even during the pogrom of 1852!<sup>28</sup> In some cases, writers suggest that the number of those killed was even higher than this or actually give higher (but, significantly, never lower) totals, such as 'tens of thousands'<sup>29</sup> in all, or nearly 'thirty thousand' during the later part of Baha' Allah's lifetime.<sup>30</sup>

It is difficult to know exactly what conclusions we may reach from all this. I have discussed some of the implications of the evident confusion of the Baha'i sources in an article due to appear next year in Religion and will not try to repeat myself at any length here. What is surprising is that the topic of martyrdom is of considerable importance for Baha'is, as it is for Sh'is, and yet no-one seems to have become aware of the numerous discrepancies in the various accounts of the overall numbers of martyrs. It does not take a mathematical mind to see the problem almost at a glance (I represent living proof of this), so one must not, I think, seek explanations of this general lack of awareness in the nature of the material itself. Of course, I think a few Baha'is with a wide grasp of historical information are, in fact, to a greater or lesser extent conscious that there is a problem, but very few seem to have brought the topic to the forefront of their minds, to the extent that they might be impelled to look more closely at the evidence. Or, if they have, they do not appear to have made any effort to encourage greater accuracy in official Baha'i publications.

To some extent, of course, we are here involved with the common tendency not to look too closely at information, to take at their face value broad concepts -- in this case something like '20,000 martyrs', leaving aside any further details. More particularly, it is possible to see the influence of

modern Baha'i conflation of Babism and Baha'ism, in which an undifferentiated phenomenon called 'the Faith' dominates the popular consciousness. I would imagine that most Baha'is, if pressed, would accept that the vast majority of martyrdoms took place in the Babi period, but in everyday thought and discourse, this does, I think, become a little attenuated until there is a broad sense of '20,000 martyrs for the Faith' mingled with a rather vague sense of countless persecutions in Iran which are somehow recorded in books in Persian not yet available to western Baha'is. I have looked in some detail at the question of conflation in my forthcoming article referred to above.

There is also, I think, manifested here an increasing tendency to place both Babi and Baha'i (or, more usually, 'Baha'i', that is both Babi and Baha'i) martyrs (and saints in general) in a remote, idealized realm in which they may serve as undifferentiated but crucial figures in a wider historical myth. Even though the Babis were not martyrs for Baha'ism in any sense and even though their militancy was, in fact, rejected in early Baha'i writing, they are absolutely essential to the creation of a sense of a dramatic past. And the matter of numbers is quite important in helping establish the credentials of Baha'ism as a 'major world faith'. Twenty thousand martyrs sound much more impressive than 'about three hundred' (or even, admitting the Babis to this number, 'from two to three thousand'). This, of course, goes hand in hand with the tendency to describe the Babis killed in Zanjan or wherever as innocent victims rather than armed combatants.

In a way, the historical facts have ceased to be important here. I cannot really see how modern Baha'is can easily get rid of their 'twenty thousand martyrs' or their heroic Babi antecedents without losing something extremely vital to their sense of identity and even community. The sense of solidarity gained through vicarious participation in the current events in Iran only serves to underscore this point. Baha'ism is deeply rooted in Shi'i ideals, is, in a sense, a sort of 'neo-Shi'ism' universalized through contact with the West, and participation in shahadat as an ideal and an image has wide implications for Baha'i religious experience. At the same time, it is evident that the 'twenty thousand martyrs' myth has its dangers. By distorting the Baha'i (or Babi-Baha'i) experience in Iran in the way that Baha'i histories have done, it has become increasingly difficult for Iranian Baha'is in particular to confront the historical realities of their situation. The perpetuation of myth creates attitudes that issue in concrete developments -- Ireland is a compelling example of myth feeding on itself in each generation. In such situations, the historian can, I feel, be of more value than the hermeneut, in that he can try to reduce the potency of the myth and, in so doing, help introduce a more sober attitude on all sides.

#### NOTES

1. For a detailed discussion of the problem of the numbers involved at Shaykh Tabarsi, see M. Komen 'The Social Basis of the Babi Upeavals in Iran (1848-53): A Preliminary Analysis', International Journal of Middle East Studies 15 (1983), pp.161-166. Muhammad <sup>C</sup>Ali Malik Khusravi gives the names of 367 individuals (Tarikh-i shuhada-yi amr, 3 vols. (Tehran, 130 badi<sup>C</sup>/1974-75), vol.2, pp.316-17), fifty-three of whom he names as survivors (baqiyyat al-sayf: see ibid, vol.1, pp.416-49). Zarandi names only 173 martyrs (Dawn-Breakers, pp.414-26).
2. See Komen, 'Social Basis', pp.166-169.
3. See ibid, p.169; Muhammad Shafi<sup>C</sup> Rawhani Mayrizi Lama'at al-anwar, 2 vols. (Tehran, 130-132 badi<sup>C</sup>/1974-77), vol.1, pp.63, 72.
4. Ibid, vol.1, pp.73, 95, 96. This figure is made up of some 60 killed in an engagement in mid-Rajab 1266 (early June 1850), 350 put to death on the capture of the fort of Khaja on 18 Sha<sup>C</sup>ban/29 June, and 50 afterwards.

5. Dawn-Breakers, p.644; see also Komen 'Social Basis', pp.167-68.
6. Zarandi gives both 1,000 and 1,800 (Dawn-Breakers, p.580).
7. See Malik Khusravi Tarikh-i shuhada, vol.3, pp.6-8, 129-332. See also Komen 'Social Basis', pp.171-72. This incident has been much exaggerated in Baha'i literature. Shoghi Effendi describes it as 'a blood-bath of unprecedented severity' (Citadel of Faith, p.100), 'a holocaust reminiscent of the direst tribulations undergone by the persecuted followers of any previous religion' (Messages to the Baha'i World, p.34), and as 'the darkest, bloodiest and most tragic episode of the Heroic Age of the Baha'i (sic) Dispensation' (ibid p.39). This exaggerated image seems to have originated with a number of European accounts, including that of Gobineau (see Komen 'Social Basis', pp.171-72 and notes 55, 56); for further details, see idem Babi and Baha'i Religions, pp.128-45.
8. Tarikh-i shuhada, vol.3, pp.6-9.
9. The following figures, though not exhaustive, provide a rough guide: 5 in Tabriz, Zanjan and Tehran in 1867; 4 in Majafabad in 1864; 2 in Isfahan in 1879; 7 in Sidih in 1890; 1 in Ashkhabad in 1889; 7 in Yazd in 1891; 5 in Turbat-i Haydari in 1896; 2 in Isfahan and about 100 in Yazd in 1903; 8 in Jahrum in 1926. For details, see Komen, Babi and Baha'i Religions, pp.251-54, 268-69, 274-77, 284-88, 296-300, 301-304, 376-85, 385-98, 405-06, 465-72. There were also 7 martyrs in Hurmuzak in 1955 (see Muhammad Labib The Seven Martyrs of Hurmuzak, trans. M. Komen (Oxford, 1981) ) and some 100 between 1979 and 1982 (see Roger Cooper, The Baha'is of Iran, Minority Rights Group Report no.51 (London, 1982) and G. Nash Iran's Secret Pogrom (Sudbury, 1982) ). For further details on earlier persecutions, see Hajj Muhammad Tahir Malmiri Tarikh-i shuhada-yi Yazd (Cairo, 1342/1923-24), Sayyid Muhammad Tabib Manshadi Sharh-i shahadat-i shuhada-yi Manshad (Tehran, 127 badi<sup>C</sup>/1971-72); Mirza Jawad Qazwini 'Epitome of Babi and Baha'i History' in E.G. Browne, Materials for the Study of the Babi Religion, pp.35-43; E.G. Browne 'Persecutions of Babis in 1888-1891 at Yazd' in ibid, pp.291-308; A.L.M. Nicolas Massacres de Babis en Perse (Paris, 1936); W.McE. Miller The Baha'i Faith: its History and Teachings (South Pasadena, 1974), pp.214, 230. <sup>C</sup>Abd al-Baha' gives the high figure of 'almost two hundred' for the martyrs of Yazd in 1903 (letter in Makatib-i 'Abd al-Baha', vol.1, p.427).
10. A Traveller's Narrative, vol.1, p.60; vol.2, p.47.
11. Letter from Dr. T. Chaplin to The Times, 5 October, 1871, quoted Komen Babi and Baha'i Religions, pp.210-12. Chaplin refers to the killing of 20,000 individuals before the Baghdad exile; he later states that <sup>C</sup>Abd al-Baha' 'gave us the information here detailed' in the course of an interview in Acre.
12. 'Alwah-i wasaya' in <sup>C</sup>Abd al-Hamid Ishraq Khavari ed. Ayyam-i tis'a, 5th. printing (Tehran, 129 badi<sup>C</sup>/1973-74), p.457; trans. Shoghi Effendi as 'The Will and Testament of <sup>C</sup>Abdu'l-Baha' in Anon. comp. The Covenant of Baha'u'llah (London, 1963), p.90 (but see later on the inaccuracy of the translation of this passage). Cf. idem, letter in Makatib, vol.1, p.385.
13. Address to Fourth Unitarian Church, Brooklyn, 16 June, 1912, in Star of the West III:10 (8, September, 1912), p.31.
14. Address to the Theosophical Society, Liverpool, 14 December, 1912, in ibid III:17 (19 January, 1913), p.4.
15. Letter to 'Aqa Bihruz' in London, in Ishraq Khavari Ma'ida-yi asmani, vol.5, p.45.
16. Address at the Brotherhood Church, Jersey City, 19 May, 1912, in Star of the West III:9 (20 August, 1912), p.9. Cf. letter in Makatib, vol.1, p.344 ('ten or twenty thousand').

17. Address to the New York Peace Society, 13 May, 1912, in Star of the West III:8 (1 August, 1912), p.15.
  18. Address to the Central Congregational Church, Brooklyn, 16 June, 1912, in ibid, III:10 (8 September, 1912), p.23.
  19. Address at Los Angeles, in ibid, II:13 (4 November, 1911), p.8.
  20. Address to the Tenth Annual Convention of the Baha'i Temple Unity, in ibid, IX:5 (5 June, 1918), p.69.
  21. God Passes By, p.xiv.
  22. Ibid., p.402.
  23. 'The Faith of Baha'u'llah' in Guidance for Today and Tomorrow, p.5.
  24. See note 12.
  25. National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the U.K., Baha'i (London, n.d.), p.10.
  26. Marzieh Gail, Introduction to Baha' Allah Epistle to the Son of the Wolf, trans. Shoghi Effendi, p.iii.
  27. Anon., foreword to Baha' Allah and <sup>C</sup>Abd al-Baha' Baha'i Revelation, p.xiv.
  28. Nash Iran's Secret Pogrom, p.22; cf. p.42 ('the most vicious pogrom of all -- the 1852 massacre of Rabis'), but cf. also pp.133, 144.
  29. Ibid, p.18.
  30. H.M. Balyuzi <sup>C</sup>Abdu'l-Baha, p.45.
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