

## A Note on Babi and Baha'i Numbers in Iran

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It is not yet possible to say with any certainty what the total number of Babis may have been. According to the Bab himself, in a work composed in the latter part of 1848, one hundred thousand adherents had been converted during the first four years of his career. (MacEoin, 1982: 117-18), a figure also referred to by the Russian Ambassador Dolgorukov in February 1849, on the authority of the Iranian chief minister, Amir Kabir (Dolgorukov, 1966: 19), and by the British minister Sheil in May 1850 (Momen, 1981: 7n). That in the case of the two diplomats at least, this was very much a guess as to the actual numbers of Babis is underlined by Sheil's reference to an alternative (but presumed to be less likely) figure of fifty thousand. Whatever the case, no detailed support for any figure can be supplied, indeed, with a semi-secret organization lacking detailed records (such as Babism), there seems to be no way in which a figure can be confirmed or denied. Anyway, given that at least some Babis resorted to taqiyya (dissimulation), and that a wider circle of secret Babis and close sympathizers existed in addition to those who were definitely identified as Babis, what figure is being estimated? Again, Sheil is clear that he is referring to the number of Babi men, and we have simply no idea to what extent women and children were involved in the movement. If significant numbers were involved (but I think not) then the figure could even have been higher.

As to the number of Baha'is, it is easiest to start with the most recent figures as they are likely to be the most reliable. Accordingly, the number of Baha'is in modern Iran has been variously estimated by Baha'i sources as about 400,000 (March 1979) or more commonly 300,000 (Dec. 1981)<sup>1</sup>, whilst informed non-Baha'i sources put the number at about 350,000 (Sept. 1979)<sup>2</sup>, or at 295,000 (mid 1975) to 340,000 (mid 1980) (Barrett, 1982:388). Whilst several thousand Baha'is have undoubtedly left Iran since the Islamic revolution of February 1979 and a small number have been forced to recant their faith, it seems highly unlikely that these together could account for the discrepancy of 100,000 between the March 1979 and December 1981 estimates. I therefore assume the March 1979 figure to be an overestimate and would assume that the number of registered Baha'is in modern Iran is in the region of 300 - 350,000, this

figure including men, women and children. These uncertainties doubtless stem from the difficulties encountered in enumerating an unrecognized/persecuted religious movement which even the movement's own leaders may experience. Prior to the present century these difficulties were compounded by the comparative lack of organization within the Baha'i community and the conditions of extreme secrecy under which most Baha'is lived, all sorts of speculations being rife. Thus, J.D. Rees (1896), who travelled through Iran in 1885, was variously told there were no "Babis" at all in Iran, and that one-third of the educated classes were "Babis". Baha'is for their part appear to have grossly overestimated their numbers (for whatever reason), and many European observers followed suit. Thus Baha'i sources informed the British Consul in Bushire (c.1888) that they had a total Middle Eastern and Indian membership of five million (Momen, 1981:247), whilst Curzon (1892, i:499) estimated that there were at least half a million Iranian Baha'is and probably more like a million, and in 1903, Baha'i and diplomatic circles in Cairo were speculating on the possibility that Baha'ism would soon become the predominant religion in Iran (Phelps, 1904:X). Some later observers were, by contrast, liable to make what were apparently gross underestimates. Thus, Rosita Forbes (1931:168) doubted if there were more than twenty thousand Iranian Baha'is, whilst J.R. Richards (1932:225) placed their upper limit at thirty thousand, and W.M. Miller (1974:215) thought that by the time of 'Abdu'l Baha's death (1921) there would have been at most fifty thousand Baha'is in the whole world. Similarly, Wilber (1967:165) has cited an (undated) official Iranian government estimate of fifty thousand Baha'is. I find none of these figures really credible, however, given the lack of any evidence for the violent fluctuations in the number of Baha'is which they presume. Compatible both with the assumption of relative stability in numbers and with the more definite 1979/81 figures are a series of estimates which placed the number of Baha'is in Iran at 100,000 in the 1880s (M.F. Wilson, 1885:829), and somewhere between 100,000 and 200,000 in both the 1910s (S.G. Wilson, 1915:26), and the 1950s (Berger, 1954:125). On this basis a coherent pattern may be suggested. Taking the estimated percentages for Babi/Baha'i numbers as a fraction of the Iranian population as a whole (Table 1), then at the peak of Babi activity they may be assumed to have won the allegiance of perhaps two per cent of the population.

TABLE 1: Babi and Baha'i Numbers in Iran

Date	Estimated Iranian Babi/Baha'i population.	Estimated total Iranian population (millions).	Babi/Baha'is as a percentage of total population.
late 1840s	100,000	4.5 - 6	1.7 - 2.2
1880s	100,000	5 - 8	1.25 - 2.0
1910s	100 - 200,000	8 - 10	1.0 - 2.5
1950s	100 - 200,000	18.9 (1956)	0.5 - 1.1
1979	300 - 350,000	33.6 (1976)	0.9 - 1.0

SOURCES: For Babi and Baha'i figures see text. For the total Iranian population estimates see Abrahaman, 1974:14; Behnam, 1968:471; Bharier 1972; Clark, 1972; Curzon, 1892, ii:471; Issawi, 1971:28. The figures for 1956 and 1976 are derived from the Iranian Census, all figures prior to 1956 are at best educated guesses.

From 1850, numbers may then be assumed to have declined dramatically, stabilizing as the community became more ordered and then increasing quite markedly towards the end of the century, the dynamic nature of the Baha'i community at that time, and perhaps the general sense of social change, encouraging the Baha'is and others to be unrealistically confident as to their rate of growth. Thus, the very high estimates for the 1880s - 1910s, whilst, at best, the Baha'is appear only to have equalled the Babi percentage of two percent of the population. This spurt of growth would then appear to have ceased in the 1920s or 1930s, outside observers referring to the lack of increase (Forbes, 1931), or even decline (Richards, 1932), in numbers. Whilst a decline in absolute numbers may not have occurred, the percentage of Baha'is in the general population seems thereafter to have declined, remaining at one percent or less through the 1950s to the present day. Whatever occasional success the Iranian Baha'is may have had in gaining new converts it does not appear to have made an appreciable difference to their overall strength. Necessarily, the Iranian Baha'i community has come to rely on natural increase and the successful socialization of its children in order to maintain its existence. If -- reflecting emerging middle class norms -- the Iranian Baha'is have a lower fertility rate than the Iranian average then this would contribute to their relative decline, but whether this is the case is unknown to me.<sup>3</sup> Whilst thousands of Iranian Baha'is have emigrated this has never been a large scale movement until recently and may thus be disregarded as a major demographic factor. The number of Azalis has always remained far smaller,

Dr. Sa'eed Khan estimating their number to be 1500 in 1930 and Jalal Azal putting them at between four and five thousand in 1963 (Miller, 1974:114, n.54; cf. Barrett, 1982:388; Keddie, 1981:52).

#### NOTES

This paper represents an amended version of section 7.1 of my Ph.D. thesis, "A Sociological Study of the Babi and Baha'i Religions" (Lancaster, 1982).

1. Press releases issued by the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United Kingdom: "Iran and the British Baha'i Community", issued 14 March 1979; and "Iran Secretly Executes Baha'i National Leaders", dated 28 December 1981. Press releases subsequent to December 1981 have all referred to a figure of 300,000.
2. A "Declaration on the State of Religious Minorities in Iran" by the Human Rights Commission of the Federation of Protestant Churches in Switzerland (Zurich), dated 12 September.
3. Barrett (1982:388) estimates the Baha'i growth rate as being 3.05% as compared with a national growth rate of 3.08%

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