

# STATE TERRORISM IN IRAN

## Understanding the Case of the Iranian Bahá'í Community

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*State Terrorism in Iran:  
Understanding the Case of the Iranian Babá'í Community*

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## **ABSTRACT**

State terrorism, as a concept, has largely been operationalised out of terrorism literature. When a state uses violence systematically against unarmed victims, with the purpose of generating fear and communicating a message to a group beyond the immediate victims, this steps outside the bounds of legitimate use of violence. The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) has engaged in such acts of violence against the Bahá'í community in that country. In this dissertation, a working model of state terrorism is devised and the following central research question is addressed: do the strategy and tactics utilized by the IRI and/or its proxies against Iranian Bahá'ís constitute state terrorism?

This qualitative study adopts a Mixed Approach Design. Eighteen Iranian Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í emigrants were purposively sampled and interviewed. In-depth interview data was triangulated and validated using structured data sources. Data analysis drew on the systematic-combining approach (Dubois & Gadde, 2002) whereby the original theoretical frame weighed against emergent findings.

This exploratory study produces empirical evidence to suggest that Iran is a terrorist state: Iranian Bahá'ís are subjected to acts and/or threats of violence stemming from the state or its surrogates; the responsibility to protect norm is not applied to Bahá'ís; and, the IRI tries to invoke fear in and beyond the Iranian population to isolate and silence Bahá'ís.

State terrorism claims many more victims than insurgent terrorism, yet the former concept is seldom mentioned in terrorism studies (Stohl, 2008). The onus is on researchers to identify cases of state terrorists and hold them to account at the international level. A special case can be made, based on the empirical evidence, for the creation of an international convention on state terrorism that would hold state governments, like the IRI, responsible for carrying out terroristic acts of violence against segments of their population.



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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) is engaged in repeated human rights violations against the largest religious minority group in that country: the Bahá'í community. The IRI has created an environment of terror and fear in which Bahá'ís are forced to live and operate. The condition of fear is pervasive—it affects most elements of Bahá'ís' lives (e.g., their social lives, occupation, religious practice, and the hope they have for their children's future, their families' financial well-being, etc.). This study examines the lived experience of Bahá'ís in Iran. It is an exploratory study—since there is a paucity of academic literature on the topic. This study presents new empirical data on the use of terror tactics by the Iranian government against the Bahá'í population in that country.

#### 1.1 Motivation for Study

As a half-Iranian Bahá'í, I grew up hearing countless stories about life in Iran. These unique stories had a prevailing theme: Iranian Bahá'ís were subjected to injustices, persecution, humiliation and violence—many times at the hands of agents of the Iranian government. I had little idea of the extent and nature of the violence perpetrated against Iranian Bahá'ís until I began researching the subject. In fact, until the recent notable advocacy campaigns (beginning the 1980s) spearheaded by the Bahá'í International Community (BIC) at the United Nations (UN) to shed light on the issue, and the spurt of diplomatic activities of Bahá'í National Spiritual Assemblies (NSAs) around the world, this issue has given little international attention. Although the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran has now gained some international attention by the UN and several Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), the issue hasn't been subjected to rigorous empirical study.

Some of the questions which surfaced in my mind as I examined the existing literature (sparse though it was) on this problem were: what are the violent tactics used against Bahá'ís by the Iranian state? How do these tactics affect their lives and well-being? Is state violence against Bahá'ís systematic and deliberate? Were the tactics utilized to generate fear? Who is the target audience of the message being conveyed by the state through these attacks? What message is the Iranian government actually trying to convey by these tactics? What is the Iranian government trying to achieve? These questions are not adequately addressed in the existing literature on the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran. In reviewing that literature, I was left with a vague impression of the phenomenological experience, emotional and socio-political response of Iranian Bahá'ís to those incidents of intimidation and violence. This is why I began reaching for memoirs and soliciting the views of Iranian Bahá'ís around me.

During this process of enquiry, it became evident that the violence being carried out by the IRI and/or its proxies is systematic and instrumental, and not just a series of “senseless” attacks. The state of Iran has created an environment of terror and fear in which Bahá'ís are forced to live and operate. This study examines the lived experience of Bahá'ís in Iran. It is an exploratory study—since there is a paucity of academic literature on the topic. But first, the academic literature on state terrorism is examined and a plausible definition of this phenomenon is proffered.

### 1.2 Literature Review

#### 1.2.1 *Re-Focusing on State Terror*

State terrorism remains largely invisible to the general public, not only because little attention is paid to it by academics (See Appendix 1) and observers but also, because states that engage in terrorist activities do not readily publicize such activities (as non-state terrorists generally do) or their human rights violations. Such activities are usually met with negative repercussions from the international community (Jalata, 2011). State terrorism is also difficult to study empirically because, as Jackson, Smyth and Gunning (2009) posit, violence by states is often ‘de facto legitimate.’ This assumption is a gross misrepresentation of the state’s monopoly over physical violence, and is dangerous. It is true that the state claims monopoly over the legitimate use of violence or physical force within its territory (Stohl, 1988). The state’s very existence, in fact, is predicated on its ability, or rather its legitimate right, to utilize violence in protection of its society, its territory and its resources against both external and internal threats (Claridge, 1996). Are all acts of violence by the state “legitimate”? If a state uses violence to coerce members within its society rather than to defend groups with that society, is this a legitimate use of violence? If a state uses violence to intimidate, or eliminate, certain segments of its population, surely this cannot be considered a legitimate use of force.

The ability of states to commit terrorist acts against their own populations and their propensity to do so on a mass scale goes without question. As Sloan (1984) puts it, “since governmental groups have the resources of the state at their disposal, they are usually capable of engaging in higher levels of terrorism than the guerrillas.” Furthermore, their terrorism is more serious and destructive, since states have the ability to institutionalize terror within state structures (Jackson, 2008) and pervert existing legal frameworks by introducing emergency national legislation to give their actions a “façade” of legitimacy (Mitchell, et. al., 1986). Therefore, it is not always easy to separate illegitimate coercive acts of the state from legitimate defensive ones. This makes “state terrorism” conceptually problematic (Stohl, 1988).

When scholars “operationalise out” state terrorism from their research and databases on political violence this can have grave socio-cultural consequences. The viewpoint that terrorism is only perpetrated by non-state actors whereas political violence is a ‘legitimate’ and ‘effective’ method by which states can resolve ‘conflict’ is circulated to the general public. But this rather narrow view of terrorism, ‘silences the voices’ of those living under conditions of terror at the hands of their governments (Jackson, 2008). Of course, a state’s rhetoric is by no means an indication of its practices: a state utilizing power illegitimately will not concede to a deliberate use of a ‘policy of terror’ (Claridge, 1996). “To call one’s opponent a ‘terrorist’ is regarded as the ultimate condemnation of their political strategy.” (Claridge, 1996). So applying this label to a suspect state is a powerful means of holding that state to account internationally for its actions and reinforcing international standards of appropriate state behaviour (Jackson, 2008). But to understand the process and function of state terrorism it is necessary to identify cases internationally in which states are utilizing violence illegitimately (i.e. outside the constraints of international law). This requires devising and testing an adequate definitional model.

#### 1.2.2 *Conceptualising State Terrorism*

Definitions of terrorism diverge in a number of respects depending on the question asked. For example: Which actors/agencies engage in terror? Who are the targets of terrorism? (Goodwin, 2006). But by focusing on the commonalities in most definitions of terrorism, one is able to realize the elements on which the definitions converge. Firstly, terrorism involves a “deliberate use of violence” or the threat to use violence. Secondly, the violence is unlawful and is designed to coerce a target audi-

ence, or several audiences (Jalata, 2011). Thirdly, the violence is intended to generate extreme fear (Pyszczynski, Solomon, & Greenberg, 2003). Walter (1969) addresses the issue of 1) the emotional reaction stemming from the threat of violence or an actual violent act; and 2) the social impact thereof (Walter 1969). According to Walter, the aggressor specifically intends to influence the behaviour of his/her ‘target’ audience via the act of terrorism. A fourth variable teased out of multiple definitions of terrorism is the fact that non-combatants are specified targets (Laqueur, 1999). This point is particularly critical when one addresses the issue: who are the targets of state terrorism? Civilians are normally expected to be protected from acts of violence and aggression, whereas combatants (i.e., those who are armed and/or organised for aggression) can be legitimate targets for political violence (Claridge, 1996). So a definitional model of state terrorism should be able to make the distinction between the legitimate use of force by the state and illegitimate use of aggression and political repression by that state against its own people (Jalata, 2011; Jackson, 2008).

A key element missing in the above definitional models is the notion of the terrorist state’s omission of its duty to protect its citizens. In international law, sovereign states have a responsibility to protect citizens living within their territorial jurisdiction. According to the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), with sovereignty comes responsibility. State sovereignty is about more than control over citizens, territory and resources. Sovereign state authorities “are responsible for the functions of protecting the safety and lives of citizens and promotion of their welfare” (ICISS, 2001, p.13). It is possible, as will be shown later, that a state can engage in terrorism by differentially applying its duty to protect. In other words, a state might decide to apply his duty to protect some citizens and not others. This is especially the case when certain elements of a state’s population are considered by that state, for political, ideological or religious reasons, to be pariahs. When that happens those elements of the state’s population can be vulnerable to persecution and/or physical violence or the threat of physical violence. Based on this understanding, and drawing from models of state terrorism advanced by Claridge (1996), Blakely (2009), Walter (1969), and Stohl (1988), I have devised the following conceptualization of state terrorism.

State terrorism is a systematic, illegitimate and deliberate act, or series of acts, of actual coercion or violence—or the threat thereof, committed by a State or its proxies against a particular group of individuals. The state may be directly responsible for the act of terror or may enable or facilitate such violence through the omission of its duty to protect those targeted individuals. The act(s) may be perpetrated by the state itself or by actors on behalf of, or in conjunction with, the state. Those actors may include paramilitaries, private security agents or other proxies who operate with the resources of the state or at the state’s behest. The victim(s) of the illegitimate use of violence are not armed for organised aggression against the state at the time of the incident. The act, threat, or facilitation, is intended to generate extreme fear in the immediate target and/or in a wider group of target observers and it is intended to communicate a message to that target audience. The target audience is, therefore, forced to consider changing their political, ideological or religious stance in some way.

This study investigates whether Iran’s use of violence, repression, aggression and blatant human rights abuse against Bahá’ís in that country amount to state terrorism.

### *1.2.3 A Brief Overview of the Bahá’í Faith*

Founded in mid-nineteenth century Persia (now Iran), the Bahá’í Faith is the youngest of the world’s independent religions (Bahá’í Topics, 2014a). The founder of the Faith was Mirza Husayn-Ali Nuri, who came to be titled Bahá’u’lláh (“Glory of God” in Arabic; Bahá’u’lláh 1817-1892). Bahá’ís believe that Bahá’u’lláh embodies the fulfillment of the eschatological expectations of Islam, Christianity, and other major religions (Danesh, 2010, pp.123-128). The Bahá’í Faith is an independent, monotheistic religion that recognizes the validity of all other religions and “Messengers of God”

(Bahá'í Topics, 2014b). Baha'is believe that God has revealed Himself through a succession of Divine Messengers (a notion referred to as “Progressive Revelation”), Whose purpose is to guide and educate mankind. Bahá'ís regard humanity as a single race and believe that the barriers of race, class, creed, and nation will eventually give way to the birth of a universal civilization (Bahá'í Topics, 2014b). The religion has its own sacred texts, as well as religious/social tenets and practices, and it is governed by democratically-elected administrative bodies (Safra, Yannias and Goulka, 1998). Bahá'ís renounce violence, do not participate in partisan politics, and are loyal to the government of the countries in which they live (SPGP, 2009).

Today, Bahá'ís number approximately 5 million worldwide (Brookshaw & Fazel, 2008) and can be found in virtually every country in the world; making the Bahá'í Faith one of the most widespread religious systems on earth (Barrett, 1988, p. 303). There are roughly 300,000 Bahá'ís currently living in Iran – constituting the largest non-Muslim religious minority in that country (BIC, 2008). Its followers have faced severe persecution in their homeland from the time of the religion's founding and many of them have lost their lives in outbursts of violence by the Iranian government and/or its proxies (SPGP, 2009; BIC, 2008).

#### *1.2.4 History and Context of the Persecution of the Bahá'ís in Iran*

Bahá'u'lláh's writings in the 19<sup>th</sup> century posed a challenge to long-adhered to doctrines of Shí'í Islam (Martin, 1984; Affolter, 2005). Firstly, Bahá'u'lláh's claim of being a Manifestation of God was seen as 'heretical' by Persian clergy. His teachings called for: the introduction of 'Western Sciences' in school curricula; the 'harmony of science and religion'; Muslim and Non-Muslim nation states to establish a world federal government; the equality of men and women; and the necessity of 'independent investigation of the truth' and an independent search for God (Bahá'u'lláh, 1990). Bahá'u'lláh also wrote that priests and clergy were no longer needed for religious guidance and he called for elected religious institutions (Bahá'u'lláh, 1990). Bahá'u'lláh's principles therefore called into question the need for clergy, the entire Shí'í ecclesiastical structure and the endowments, benefices and fees that sustained it (Martin, 1984).

Social and political tensions ensued and fuelled attacks against Bahá'ís up until the Iranian Revolution. Prior to the Islamic Revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini made known his sentiment about the Bahá'ís frequently referring to them as traitors, Zionists, economic plunderers and enemies of Islam (Abrahamian, 1993, p. 48). The increase in severity of the persecution of Bahá'ís after the 1979 Islamic revolution has been recognized and condemned by non-Bahá'í and Bahá'í scholars (Falk, 1981; Dowty, 1989; Menashri, 1995; Keddie, 1995). Following the Islamic Revolution, many anti-Bahá'í clerics joined the Iranian government and a centralized government-directed campaign against Bahá'ís in Iran and abroad developed (Afshari, 2011; Brookshaw & Fazel, 2008; See Appendix 2).

## CHAPTER 2

### METHODOLOGY

#### 2.1 Aims of the Study

The current study has five aims. 1) To devise a ‘working theoretical model’ of state terrorism that is comprehensive enough to be used to identify cases of state terrorism around the world. 2) To reveal instances in which persecution, torture, physical violence and the threat of such violence are used by the IRI and/or its proxies to intimidate Bahá’ís in Iran or those who support them. 3) To explore the socio-emotional impact of state terrorism on Iranian Bahá’ís and their non-Bahá’í sympathizers. 4) To determine whether the violence meted out against Bahá’ís by the Iranian state conforms to the definition of state terrorism posited in the introduction of this study. And, 5) to utilize the emergent empirical data to adjust the working theoretical model.

The central research question being addressed is: to what extent do the strategy, actions and tactics utilized by the Iranian state and/or its proxies against the Iranian Bahá’í community in fact constitute state terrorism? Addressing the following sub-questions is imperative for realizing the aims of this study.

1. *What is the nature of the violence?* Are the tactics being used against Bahá’ís by the state of Iran violent in nature?

2. *Is the violence deliberate and systematic?* To what extent is the violence utilized by the state against Iranian Bahá’ís intentional, calculated, conscious, premeditated and methodical?

3. *Who carries out these acts of violence?* Are they committed by the state, by agents of the state, or by both?

4. *Are these tactics and actions designed to generate fear among Bahá’ís and their sympathizers?* What is the purpose of these tactics and actions? How do they affect the lives and well-being of Iranian Bahá’ís?

5. *Who are the targets of these violent attacks?* Is the target audience simply the members of the Bahá’ís community, or the wider Iranian community?

6. *What message is being conveyed with the use of this violence by the IRI?* Is the message political, religious, or both?

7. *Are the violence tactics instrumental?* Is the Iranian government trying to eliminate this religious minority group in Iran or trying to get its members to renounce their faith?

8. *What is the nature of the targets of this violence?* Are the violent actions being carried out against a peaceful people? Are the Bahá’ís and/or their non-Bahá’í sympathizers armed or engaged in armed resistance against the Iranian government?

## 2.2 Qualitative Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design (Appendix 3). A major challenge in this research was the fact that data and information were limited for several reasons. NGO reporting on the attacks are few; news reports in Iran do not ‘report on’ violent attacks against Bahá’ís, Bahá’í arrests, or Bahá’í cemetery destruction in a ‘neutral’ manner; access to the Bahá’í population in Iran posed issues of safety; and, secondary sources about Bahá’í persecution tend not to convey the socio-emotional and socio-political aspects of the Iranian Bahá’í experience. And, to determine whether the phenomenon of violence meted out against Bahá’ís constitutes state terrorism it must be established that the Iranian state intends to ‘generate fear (terror)’ and that pre-meditated terror tactics are intended to get the ‘target audience’ to change its socio-political behaviour in some specific way. That leaves the researcher with only memoirs, but there are very few of those available (e.g., Roohizadegan, 1993).

Given the aforementioned limitations, the Pragmatic Paradigm was adopted and influenced the methodological approach to the research. The Pragmatic theoretical framework is not anchored in a particular philosophy; rather, this approach to research is linked to the research questions (Creswell, 2013). This theoretical framework allows the researcher to take on multiple approaches, protocols, methods, assumptions, and forms of data collection and analyses best suited to the overall purpose of the study (Creswell, 2013; Darlington & Scott, 2002). The study adopts a mixed-methods design—using two forms of qualitative inquiry—as described below.

Different strategies of inquiry are required to assess the various criteria of the definition of state terrorism. One objective of this study is to understand ‘lived realities’ of persecution, threat of violence and actual violence from the perspective of Bahá’í and non-Bahá’í sympathizers who experienced it. A phenomenological strategy of inquiry utilizing an in-depth interview protocol seemed best suited for exploring this socio-emotional experience and impact. It should be borne in mind that to establish ‘intent,’ the researcher must determine whether the Iranian state employs a pre-meditated “policy of terror” by gaining first-hand accounts of the violence and socio-political effect of the violence on Bahá’ís and their sympathizers in that country. This approach recognizes the fact that terror tactics employed by the state are often disguised as ‘legitimate’ law enforcement, and Bahá’í persecution in Iran is built into the legal structure itself. As a result, state tactics that appear innocuous to outside observers can and do place local targeted populations under extreme fear. The best way to assess whether what we are seeing in Iran is akin to state terrorism is to explore the ‘lived experience’ of Iranian Bahá’ís and their non-Bahá’í sympathizers.

However, the research aims also necessitate the use of structured data sources to verify interview data (Huberman & Miles, 1994) and reveal new dimensions of the research problem, namely the historical strategy of terror and forms of persecution that are systematized/ institutionalized in Iran—of which the lay observer may be unaware. Such sources of data could reveal aspects of the empirical world unknown to the researcher and the participants (Yin, 1994). According to Yin (1994), the use of multiple sources in analysis and interpretation constitutes ‘Triangulation.’ The intent of triangulation is to increase the accuracy, ‘thickness’ and completeness of the narrative generated in this study.

### 2.2.1 *Logic*

Qualitative research generally involves inductive logic (Appendix 3), but the aims of the current study necessitate a slight departure from inductive logic. Whilst testing whether the themes generated from the qualitative data are a ‘good fit’ for the definitional model of state terrorism devised in the introduction (i.e., deduction), it is important not to gloss-over new themes, ideas or phenomenon that emerge from the data (i.e., induction). Modes of data collection and analysis taken-up to meet the needs of the study were shaped by the form of inference utilized. The definitional model of state ter-

rorism guided the formulation of the interview questions, the participant selection (e.g., non-Bahá'í participants were selected because they are sometimes the “target audience” of state terror) and structured data sources sought after for this study. It also guided the initial phase of data analyses (i.e., code construction). Therefore, the initial part of the investigation was ‘theory driven.’

Theory driven research can limit qualitative researchers, however, in that those researchers are forced to compare data to the initial theory driving the data collection, but data that are not a ‘good fit’ within the original framework often remain excluded from the analysis. The researcher aimed to generate a ‘faithful representation’ of all the data acquired in the study as this is a new line of inquiry: patterns emerging from the data could very well describe better a phenomenon other than ‘state terrorism’ (e.g., genocide, or human rights abuse). This involves investigating data that falls outside of the ‘theoretical frame’ (i.e., the dimensions of state terrorism). Therefore, in analyzing data obtained from interviews and structured data sources, additional codes were devised and emergent themes explored. The research therefore utilizes the ‘systematic combining’ approach (Dubois & Gadde, 2002), which is similar to the ‘abduction’ approach pioneered by Peirce (1931). This approach works through the systematic combining of established theoretical models and new concepts emerging from the data, whereby the original theoretical frame is successively modified by unanticipated empirical findings (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). The approach described above is especially suited to a study like this one, which is exploratory in nature.

### 2.3 Methods

One particular challenge confronting the researcher while trying to identify a ‘sample’ group for this study is the fact that Bahá'ís in Iran could not participate via the same means of communication (i.e., social media, telephone, e-mail), as they would be in danger by doing so. However large numbers of Iranian Bahá'ís have immigrated to Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom and elsewhere following the 1979 Iranian Islamic Revolution. Participants were recruited using several purposive sampling methods. Three participants were personal contacts who obtained six additional contacts via the snowball recruitment strategy (Gilliom, 2001). The remaining 9 participants were sought through gatekeepers: namely, the Bahá'í Local Spiritual Assembly (LSA) of Toronto, and the Bahá'í National Spiritual Assembly (NSA) of Canada’s Department of External Affairs. Participants were selected based on the inclusion criteria that they migrated or fled from Iran after the Islamic Revolution. While this approach raises questions about seeking samples that can be described as ‘scientifically representative,’ it was deemed more important to gain access to individuals with whom a level of trust could be established so that in-depth interviews would be generated, and to select individuals (and this was important for non-Bahá'ís) who have a degree of awareness of Bahá'í persecution in Iran that would allow them to participate fully in the study.

The sample (n=18) consisted of 16 Bahá'í participants of varied ages (22-83 years of age); and, 2 non-Bahá'í participants who had emigrated to Canada, the US, the UK, or Australia. To address the question of change, the sample was divided into two groups during analysis: those who emigrated between 1979 and 1990 and those who emigrated after 1990. Once participants were contacted, they were given a letter of introduction, information sheet, and consent form (Appendix 4); and were informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were informed that their identities, and those of anyone they identified in the course of their interviews, would be kept anonymous unless they specified otherwise. No financial incentives were offered for participation in the study. Ethics approval for conducting this research was granted by the University College London Department of Security and Crime Science Ethics Committee. Interviews (n=18) were conducted between June 20<sup>th</sup> and July 28<sup>th</sup>, 2014.

Two versions of the interview schedule were devised, keeping in mind the dimensions of state terrorism. The first version was developed for delivery to Bahá'í participants (Appendix 5); and, the second version was modified for non-Bahá'í participants (Appendix 6). Both interview schedules were translated into Persian (Farsi) versions (Appendix 7). Both versions were piloted with 3 respondents prior to data collection; data from pilots were included in data analysis. The interview contained open-ended questions, intended to generate in-depth responses pertaining to the dimensions of state terrorism and to explore additional themes (one objective of systematic-combining approach).

One-on-one semi-structured interviews were conducted via Skype, telephone or e-mail. Participants were advised to situate themselves during the course of the interview in a private location free from distractions so they could answer questions comfortably and freely. Interviews were scheduled at times that were most suitable for the participant, so that the length of the interview was not an issue in restricting the participant's responses.

The interview schedule served more as a 'guide' for the researcher whilst conducting interviews. Interviews were conducted in English (n=12) and Persian (Farsi; n=6). The sequence and question format varied between participants depending on the nature of participant responses. Initial questions were asked as a means of developing rapport with participants and putting them at ease. Then questions from the interview began. Probe questions were used (Guest et al., 2006), depending on the detail participants provided in their responses. A curious and open, but emotionally neutral, style of questioning was adopted to protect against biasing participants. Interviews varied from 35 minutes to 1 hour and 15 minutes. All interviews were recorded via Screenium, or 'Voice-memos' and were transcribed verbatim thereafter to keep a record of exactly what was said. Field notes documenting initial impression of themes, observations, thoughts, and striking elements of each interview were written during and following each interview—and used to aid in the data analysis process. Persian interviews were transcribed in the original language then translated into English as 'literally' as possible, without losing meaning.

The structured data sources utilized consisted of archival documents (see Appendix 8). These documents were reviewed for the purpose of triangulation—to corroborate and give credence to the narratives extracted from participants, and gain additional insight.

## 2.4 Data Analysis

Data Analysis followed the systematic combining approach (Dubois & Gadde, 2002). The analysis consisted of 5 main phases. (1) Prior to reading through interview transcripts and re-reading structured data sources, an initial coding framework of 10 codes were devised based on the various dimensions of state terrorism (See Appendix 9). This constitutes the deductive portion of the approach. (2) Transcripts and structured data sources were read through carefully, the text was coded initially based on the 10 themes specified. A computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) package, NVivo, was used to manage large amounts of material and assist with subsequent phases of the analysis. (3) The next phase involved re-reading the interview and structured source material with the intention of discovering interview material and classifying it into potential novel codes, themes and categories (Appendix 10). (4) Themes were then re-evaluated and the focus of the analysis became understanding the links between themes and segments generated by the individual narratives (induction). (5) Empirical observations resulted in the identification of unanticipated themes which were used to expand, clarify, and adjust the theoretical model of state terrorism.

## CHAPTER 3

### FINDINGS

#### 3.1 Master-Narrative

The master-narrative emerging from the data is as follows: Iranian Bahá'ís are subjected to violent acts and/or the threat of violence stemming from the state or its surrogates. The intent of the state is to evoke fear in its utilization, or threat of the use, of violence against unarmed individuals (Bahá'ís). Individuals interviewed for this project were subjects of such violence and persecution by being: subjected to the violence first hand; witnesses to the violence; directly threatened by the violence, and; placed under surveillance or monitoring by the state, state agents, 'neighbourhood watch', or prejudiced individuals. Bahá'ís know that their human rights are neither protected under the Iranian Constitution nor upheld by the Iranian justice system. Bahá'ís know that they can be attacked by anyone and that their attackers can act with impunity. Furthermore, Bahá'ís who have been attacked, imprisoned, killed, persecuted, etc., have suffered these consequences simply because of adherence to their Faith—not because they have committed a crime, or were involved in armed struggle against the government.

The resounding message conveyed by Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í participants in this study, as well as gleaned from secondary sources, is that the IRI's penultimate goal is to get Bahá'ís to recant their faith or leave the country. The ultimate goal is to "eliminate" Bahá'ís from Iran—as implied in the Government motto of a completely 'seamless society' (*Ummah*), with no room for "others." Participants revealed that there are direct and indirect methods by which the IRI goes about fulfilling this goal. However, the preponderance of evidence suggests that the government's terror tactics have had unintended consequences. Whilst the IRI's intention is to invoke fear in the Bahá'í population, Bahá'ís deal with violence and persecution in a different way (one rooted in Bahá'í beliefs), which allows them to be brave in the face of such oppression.

#### 3.2 Threat of Violence (Psychological Violence)

Despite the indomitable spirit of the Iranian Bahá'ís, the community is nonetheless negatively affected daily by the threat of violence, persecution, extemporaneous attacks, arbitrary arrests, unjust imprisonment, and murder. Threats come in indirect/ veiled, and direct, forms.

##### 3.2.1 Direct Threats

According to participants in the study, threats were often issued directly by state agencies. One might refer to such threats as 'conditional assault.' In several cases, threats were used against individuals; family members; Bahá'í administrative bodies such as the various LSAs and Youth Committees; and, Bahá'í organizations such as the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Education (BIHE).

#### **Direct Threats against Bahá'ís State Agents:**

##### *a) Threats against individuals:*

*“...my uncle’s best friend was shot in the head by one of the government’s agents. He was warned many times to stop practicing his religion and he did not do so and was finally beaten up and shot in the head in his car with a black bag on his head.”*

*b) Threats against family members:*

*E.g., 1: “My dear friend, he had a 3 month old baby—still nursing—the revolutionary guard marched into their house, took the baby from his mother. She begged for her child back. The guards said we will exchange Mr. X, and release the baby back to his mother. He went with them, knowing that he would be killed. His wife only received a call, just a phone call, saying to come collect her husband’s body.”*

*E.g., 2: “[with regard to her appealing her husband’s wrongful imprisonment and subsequent execution] participant M said “Any time we went to appeal the imprisonment of the innocent Bahá’ís we were dealt with cruelty, harsh words and behaviours. The prison guards were filled with prejudice and give us judgmental looks and attitude. We receive so many prank calls at midnight terrifying us with horrifying noises and messages.”*

*c) Threats against Bahá’í administrative bodies (e.g., LSA, Youth Committee members):*

*E.g., 1: Youth Committee of Gombad: “one day we got a note from one of the assembly members saying that they had to disclose the names of the Youth Committee members because the government was after active youth as well. So after that we were asked to leave the city because when they said be careful we kind of put the two and two together. So some of us went to different places, different cities, or stayed with relatives rather than in their own home.”*

*E.g., 2: Youth Committee of Shiraz: “my husband was a member of the Youth Committee (Shiraz Youth Committee) ... the Revolutionary Guard were very much after them. Most of the people, the women that were killed in Shiraz, were all members of the Youth Committee at the time.”*

*E.g., 3: the LSA of Tebran: “There were so many different types of problems and attacks. Sometimes they would call the houses of LSA [Local Spiritual Assembly] members informing [the members] there had been discussions during the meetings in the Masjed [mosque] and that ‘at night the houses of the LSA members would be attacked and set on fire.’ So, LSA members would not go home or they would stay out all night or stay in their cars all night to protect their families. One day they (the Revolutionary Guards) finally did it [made good on their threat] after hours of searching, they took books and Bahá’í tapes; and, they arrested and took my husband with them.”*

*d) Threats made against other Bahá’í organizations (e.g., BIHE):*

The Bahá’í Institute for Higher Education or BIHE, the informal post-secondary institution which was created in 1987 by the Bahá’í community to provide opportunities for those individuals denied access to higher education in Iran. But, the BIHE has been under repeated attack and the threat of attack. Its teachers are threatened, arrested and imprisoned:

*“They attacked [the BIHE] a few times and in the last attack my friends were arrested and I didn’t get arrested. I was summoned to the Intelligence Service of Iran several times, had some interrogations, I went to Evin, I was in prison for 9 days... Basically, they wanted to—in [year withheld]—the last attack, they explicitly said that ‘you don’t have the right of education,’ and Iranian authorities, including the Ministry of Education, have ordered [the BIHE] to ‘stop your activities in this university’ and [asked] ‘why do you continue that?’... So this being said, they systematically want to stop any organized thing in Iran for the Bahá’ís.”*

Outside of the state agents, more “fanatical” or “prejudiced” Iranians often threatened the Bahá’ís and, in unfortunate cases, violence transpired from those threats.

#### Direct Threats from Fanatic/Prejudiced Iranians:

*“I remember in smaller villages and towns, some Muslims would sing “sageh Bábi/Bahá’í” [the “Bahá’í dog”] whenever a Bahá’í man, woman or child was passing or inscribe the same on the walls of homes owned by Bahá’ís. If there was no reaction from the Bahá’í, which was often the case, they would sing “sageh kareh [deaf] Bábi/Bahá’í” implying that not only the Bahá’í is a dog but a deaf dog! This was easy to handle and somewhat funny. Other cases involved throwing stones and or attacking Bahá’ís with the intention to cause bodily harm or death.”*

#### 3.2.2 Veiled/ Indirect Threats

Non-Bahá’ís were made to understand that by supporting the Bahá’ís they would be acting against the government. This is an implied threat.

#### Implied Threats: non-Bahá’ís supporting Bahá’ís

A non-Bahá’í participant states: *“No they [non-Bahá’ís] cannot defend or support Bahá’ís in Iran, since their own life could be in danger... They would definitely be punished, abused or killed secretly.”*

A Bahá’í participant stated that: *“Oh yeah. Yeah... their life would be in danger—or let’s say if they have businesses they could do something to hurt their business. So [the state] does not want anybody actively defending the rights of the Bahá’ís. If people express their thoughts and views, that’s different than being active about it. So I’m sure that as soon as people try to do that actively they would be, one way or another, persecuted themselves.”*

The Bahá’ís interviewed faced at least two kinds of veiled threats. The first, was one created by government surveillance in every aspect of Bahá’ís’ lives; the second, was created by administrative forms (especially for educational institutions and Iranian Embassy). Administrative meetings, including LSA and Youth Committee gatherings, were especially dangerous because, according to participants, the government “systematically” tried to “limit anything organized;” and pursued a strategy of attacking Bahá’í leadership.

#### 3.2.2a Monitoring

Monitoring combined with the precedents of attacks on Bahá’ís in similar situations was considered a constant menace for the Bahá’ís in Iran. Participants conveyed that threat was especially heightened during Bahá’í gatherings (e.g., Bahá’í feasts, holy day celebrations, deepenings, administrative meetings, devotional gatherings, youth gatherings and children’s classes). Interview participants conveyed that these activities were “all under watch” and violence could ensue because the “Revolutionary Guards could march in at any time.”

*“All Bahá’í activities were monitored. Although I was quite young, I remember that all feast programs had to be scanned by the revolutionary guards or someone in their department before being released to the feast chairperson to be shared at the gathering. My mom was part of several committees and assemblies and she was always on their radar.”*

Non-Bahá’ís who attended Bahá’í meetings were also monitored and faced the risk of arrest and imprisonment under the charge of “apostasy.” For example, a non-Bahá’í participant in the study was

politely asked to leave a Bahá'í feast otherwise her "life would be in danger." A non-Bahá'í participant said:

*"I would not feel safe attending a Bahá'í wedding or funeral, since the government's agents are always monitoring the Bahá'í meetings. I would be at a higher risk of being arrested, because I am a Muslim attending a Bahá'í meeting and that is absolutely unacceptable in Iran. I actually have been to one of their meetings and they (the government agents) requested that I leave and explained the reason being that I would be putting myself at a high risk of danger."*

It goes without saying that these core Bahá'í activities were extremely limited in size after the Revolution. Prior to the revolution, the Bahá'í community could openly hold vibrant gatherings. For example a Bahá'í participant noted:

*"We had large Bahá'í gatherings too: 300 people would attend local meetings, more than that even. There was always a positive spirit; venues were packed. Youth gatherings, children's classes, adult deepenings... It was just beautiful, inspiring, full of life, filled with love and joy... Now we have basement meetings: they're small, so that they don't draw attention to them, and no formal administrative meetings."*

After the Revolution the size of Bahá'í gatherings was limited by state regulations:

*"...the last that I remember while I was in Iran was that groups had to be less than 15. Or maybe something closer to 10. So that becomes, actually, maybe 2 or 3 families. So it actually looked more like a 'visit.'"*

Administrative meetings, including LSA and Youth Committee gatherings, were especially dangerous because the government "systematically" tried to "limit anything organized," and pursued a strategy of attacking Bahá'í leadership.

The intimidation created by state surveillance was not limited to core Bahá'í gatherings. It also was extended to Bahá'í weddings and funerals. The Revolutionary Guard raided Bahá'í weddings:

*"...at my brother's wedding—they had a small gathering in the basement quietly, with music. The Revolutionary Guard came in, confiscated the music equipment, separated the men and women, and took my brother for questioning on his wedding day. But we were so, so thankful that he wasn't arrested."*

Funerals, particularly of Bahá'ís who had been martyred (rather than of those who had died of "natural causes"), were under scrutiny by the Revolutionary Guard, and were subjected to raids:

*"...for the funerals that I attended, these were people who passed away because of natural causes. If they were martyred... then there could have been restrictions and visits from the Revolutionary Guards."*

In fact, several Bahá'í cemeteries have been confiscated or destroyed and the rights to a proper Bahá'í burial were denied under the theocratic regime so "even the dead are not left alone." But the replacement cemeteries granted to Bahá'ís by the state had low walls or "no walls around" so that funerals would be visible for surveillance purposes.

Surveillance and monitoring were, however, extended into the private lives of Bahá'ís—into the home, their occupation and social relationships. Participants in the study indicated that they were watched "under a microscope." The home was hardly a "safe haven" from scrutiny. Bahá'ís' phone lines were frequently tapped and their letters (and social media sites, for those participants who left Iran recently) were definitely placed under state surveillance. As a result, Bahá'ís were "forced to be

cautious,” to filter their conversations or to speak in “codes.” A quote from a Bahá’í participant gives a sense of the non-threatening nature of the “codes:”

*“Yes, [we] always [had to filter what we said]. We would never ask a question about the Bahá’í faith or the community on the phone... I wouldn’t steer the conversation in that direction. When we wrote letters too. Everything had to be done with caution. We were always worried. We would talk in code sometimes. For example when we wanted to say “she went on pilgrimage in Haifa,” we would say, “she went to visit her Pedar Bozorg [Grandfather];” and to say “she will say prayers on your behalf,” I’d say “she will send your greetings to Him for you.”*”

However, it would appear that the state was very good at extracting information from coded Bahá’í conversations. *“We all [filtered our conversations] but we always found out that no matter what we did, they were listening and could figure out [what we were saying].”* What they are after is information about the Bahá’í administration, about active Bahá’ís, or about Bahá’í gatherings:

*“You were never to say that you are a Bahá’í unless someone asked you, never to promote the faith, never to talk about the community activities and never to mention the name of any committee or LSA members in person or over the phone.”*

Sometimes the tactics were more blatant, evidenced by the fact that the Iranian Intelligence Service, the Revolutionary Guard and various ministries of the state would send letters explicitly requesting that the names of members of Bahá’í committees and administrative bodies be “disclosed.”

Bahá’ís who participated in this study were well aware that the Revolutionary Guards could raid their homes anytime. A Bahá’í participant conveyed the starkest realization of this type of overt intimidation:

*“Whenever I left home, I would look back thinking I may never be able to return to it again. Our lives were mixed with fear, even sometimes we slept with full clothes on so that when they came for us we would be ready and presentable. Not just us, but a lot of Bahá’ís lived that way for years.”*

The worry was not unwarranted, as Iranian Bahá’ís have experienced this as an ongoing phenomenon within their community and other Bahá’ís were “in the same boat.” Out of my sample alone, six of 16 Bahá’í participants had their homes raided.

Bahá’ís often felt like fugitives in this regard, and experienced being “on the run,” living from “place-to-place” or “house to house” with different family members and friends or “sleeping in [their] cars,” until the threat subsided, and the heat was off their house. But, it was not always an option for Bahá’ís to return to their homes; in some instances, they had no choice but to “give up everything,” to leave all of their belongings behind, and flee because it was “too dangerous to return” home.

*“My family and friends helped me escape Hamedan with my seven-year-old daughter. I went from house-to-house, staying days here-and-there in Tebran for a few days at a time over a period of four months until I finally fled Iran to Pakistan.”*

Furthermore, there is evidence that Revolutionary Guards utilized the ‘neighbourhood watch’ (i.e., regular citizens) to surveil the activities and movements of Bahá’ís, and they were asked to inform on their Bahá’í neighbours and acquaintances, thus multiplying the eyes and ears of the state.

*“They were after us—and specifically my husband... Because he was on the list, whenever we would travel, whenever he would have to do anything for his business, they would check the list... the [Revolutionary Guard] came to our*

*place... We were not home that night. And, we never went back home after that... the neighbours—we were living in a 3-storey apartment—and the neighbours on the second floor, they were asked to inform them [the Revolutionary Guard] as soon as we got home. And they were the ones who told us—we were at a friend's for the evening and when we arrived late at night and we were quietly getting to our apartment, the neighbour from the second floor just opened the door, she was waiting for us and she said 'why are you here, they were here looking for you. And I'm supposed to report back to them...' at the time they... would use the neighbourhood watch, the people who are in the neighbourhood, to report Bahá'ís], and to inform them of the activities (if there are any meetings going on by the Bahá'ís). So they would inform them and then the Revolutionary Guards would come and do the action...*"

Bahá'ís “never [knew]” who could have been “watching.” The idea that those around them could report the Bahá'ís to the authorities for engaging in Bahá'í activities or for talking about their Faith, or simply because those individuals had anti-Bahá'í sentiments or were acting out of “spite” at any time, came up several times in the transcripts. Bahá'ís therefore had to be wary about where and with whom they revealed their Bahá'í identity.

*“In my opinion, the fear is not created by ‘a few people’ here-and-there: anyone in power can create trouble for the Bahá'ís if he so chooses to, especially in smaller towns and villages. A mullah, a pastar [Revolutionary Guard] could decide to hurt a Bahá'í or attack their place of business, for no reason or without any orders from authorities. And then, some fanatic and uninformed individuals might become influenced by that act and do harm themselves. Some escalate to the level of madness and with blind-prejudice hurt the masloom [innocent] Bahá'ís so badly.”*

Eight participants mentioned that Bahá'ís had their business activities monitored, vandalized, or broken into. Only one of these participants had first-hand experience, as her husband's business activities faced “numerous objections” and “limitations.” However, a number of secondary sources suggests that the extent of the monitoring of, and attacks on, Bahá'í businesses may not have been fully revealed by this study. For instance, the SPGP database, the BIC, and Iran Press Watch have all documented many more cases of this discriminatory phenomenon.

Activities that were not necessarily directly related to their Baha'í Faith were monitored; and, in the process of that monitoring, if information was uncovered about their Faith, this could land them “into trouble.” There is therefore no situation that is safe if you are a Bahá'í in Iran—because the surveillance (and threat) is ever present:

*“...as a Bahá'í basically they give you the impression intentionally that ALL your activities are monitored. So you have to censor yourself more and more. This is basically a method of oppression. This is an internalized oppression they want to force you to have. They want you to think that you are always being monitored, your cell phones, your phones, your lives, inside your homes, they might have installed devices—electronic devices—to hear whatever you are talking about. Wherever you go. So as a Bahá'í in Iran you will be cautious of what you talk, you will be cautious of where you go, you will be cautious of whom you are going with, you will be cautious of—so everything—they make you feel that if you are going to be in trouble, even if it is a very simple trouble for example if you are going somewhere in your car for example to a meeting—a Bahá'í meeting—and the police stops you just to ask for your driver's licence -- the back of your mind is saying ‘if something goes wrong and if it in any way connects to if you are a Bahá'í then you might be more and more in trouble.’ So you want to always censor yourself in different ways.”*

### 3.2.2b Administrative forms

Another theme that emerged was the official government forms and administrative forms used, as a means of surveillance, as a means of getting Bahá'ís to disclose their religion and subsequently as a means of persecuting Bahá'ís. Application forms for Iranian universities have been used to purge uni-

versities of Bahá'í students. Bahá'ís thus, have been denied the right to a higher education unless they recant their faith. The denial of the Bahá'ís' right to higher education in Iran is well documented in the secondary literature. All Bahá'í participants, or children of Bahá'í participants, who applied to university had their applications denied. National universities used to deny Bahá'í applications explicitly if the applicants indicated they were Baha'is. But now, due to international outcry, the Universities are more subtle and reject those applications on the grounds that they are “incomplete.”

*“Basically [the BIHE] means everything in terms of education because as I said about secondary education, as a Bahá'í you cannot have education. That being said, a lot of the time Bahá'ís are expelled from high schools as well. For example, my sister, got expelled from high school two times. And I, along with many other Bahá'ís, applied for university entrance exams but we were rejected because, they basically said that ‘your files are incomplete’ which was a lie—I mean they were obviously complete. I mean in the past they had bluntly said that the Bahá'ís cannot have education, but in this case they said your files are not complete. Our files were complete. Anyway, BIHE means everything in terms of education for Bahá'ís because that's the only way to get educated [in Iran].”*

Even more troublingly, administrative forms at the high school level were used to filter Bahá'ís out of educational institutions. For instance, a Bahá'í participant was kicked out of high school for filling out “Bahá'í?” under the heading ‘religion’ on his high school administrative form:

*“...when I started year 11 at high school in the first few weeks we received the questionnaire which we had to fill in and return. One of the question was: ‘what is your religion?’ Obviously, as a newly reaffirmed Bahá'í, I answered the question as Bahá'í even though you would have known that there would be some consequence. As ... expected, a few days later they called my name and two other students to go to the office. They again asked us if our answer to that question is firm and not to be changed under any circumstances. When we said [we would not change it] they called our parents and asked us to leave the school and not to come back again unless we changed our belief. Later on we tried a few other schools but the answer was the same. At that moment my parents decided that there wouldn't be any academic future for me [in Iran], so they decided to send me abroad, via people smugglers, into Pakistan as you could not get a passport to even leave the country because of your belief.”*

This left his parents with no other option but to have him smuggled out of the country so that he would have some hope of a future:

*“The most horrible trauma was when my son was kicked out of school [for being Bahá'í] and we had to make sure he could flee Iran so that we could provide him with the chance of a better future. My heart was shattered, as I had to take my son to a smuggler—a complete stranger—and give him my son, pay him, and not know what would happen next. I did not know who the smuggler was or what kind of person he was. I did not know where he would take my son; I had no means of communicating with him or knowing if he would cross my son over the border in one-piece, healthy, alive... No words can explain that feeling. I can never forget the sadness and sorrow that I felt when the van drove away and took my son away from me. I did not know what to do but scream and beg Bahá'u'lláh to keep him safe and under His protection.”*

The Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran (the border access granting agency) crafted the administrative forms in such a way that Bahá'ís would be forced to disclose their religion. Then the Embassy would use this information subsequently to deny Bahá'ís Exit and Entry Visas and Passports.

*“When I requested my official passport, they told me it is ready and will be issued to me if I say on my passport application form that I am not a Bahá'í. I refused [to fill out that I am not a Bahá'í on my application]. They treated me horribly.”*