

In Conversation with Iqan Shahidi

Casper Alexander Sanderson

Iqan Shahidi is a PhD candidate in Intellectual History at the University of Cambridge. He completed his undergraduate studies in Sociology at the Bahai Institute of Higher Education and was arrested in 2010 because of his activities in support of the universal right to access education. After he was released from a five-year prison sentence, he continued his studies in the UK with a Master's in Social and Political Thought at the University of Sussex, and an MPhil in Intellectual History and Political Thought at the University of Cambridge.

CJLPA: Iqan, where did you grow up, and what did you study before arriving in Cambridge?

Iqan Shahidi: I grew up in a city in the west of Iran called Kermanshah. When I turned 18, I took the national university entrance exam. I was informed that I couldn't attend university because my file was incomplete. That's a common error encountered by members of the Baha'i faith.

After being turned down, I wanted to explore the issue and to access my right to higher education. So, I started corresponding with a number of authorities: from various commissions of the parliament, the Islamic Commission on Human Rights, various NGOs defending civic rights, religious and political authorities in our region and at the national level, to courts of justice. But the result was the same. I was not allowed to go to university because I was a Baha'i.

CJLPA: So, wherever you went they just said: 'Sorry, that's not possible?'

IS: It wasn't fully clear in all the cases. Some of them said they would investigate, but I never heard anything back. It was interesting because the agency that was responsible for the national exam said: 'You can't go to university because of a memorandum that was signed in 1991 by Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran'.¹ In that memorandum, it is mentioned that Baha'is must not be permitted to attend university, and that any paths towards their economic or cultural progress should be blocked. That's the reason why Baha'is can't access higher education, hold governmental jobs, or be teachers, for example.

I started studying at an institution founded in 1987 by the Baha'i community itself: the Baha'i Institute for Higher Education (BIHE). It was an active and constructive response to the systematic deprivation of their right to education. They hired all the Baha'i

professors who had been expelled after the Islamic revolution, taking advantage of this wide pool of human resources and putting it to good use.

I studied sociology at the BIHE and was arrested during the last semester of my studies because of my human rights activities. Whilst I was studying, I collaborated with an increasing number of lawyers, human rights defenders and social activists that were trying to follow legal paths for acquiring the right to education for those who had been deprived of it.

CJLPA: So, you were very much making connections and exploring the options there. Did you then hold protests?

IS: No, we didn't hold protests. The Baha'i faith recommends that Baha'is obey the government, and if they face discrimination or persecution, they are encouraged to focus on attaining their legal rights through legal means at the local and national level. If that doesn't resolve the issue, like in Iran, they are urged to simultaneously explore every international legal avenue in order to acquire these rights.

CJLPA: Would you say the Baha'i approach to obtain social rights – through legal pathways – is a humanistic approach? Is it in line with Baha'i beliefs?

IS: Yes, Baha'is actively try to promote these kinds of values, because they believe that humans hold the utmost responsibility to bring injustice to a standstill. They have tried to promote these ideas in peaceful ways, to share these principles, to promote them at all times, in all possible spaces. The original Baha'i population of Iran was a mixture of different communities from various backgrounds: Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians, Muslims (both Sunni and Shia) and atheists. They tried to embody these principles within that community so that people could hold the same rights and respect for each other.

¹ The memorandum is available online at <<https://www.humanrights.bic.org/iran>>.

CJLPA: How would you describe the Baha'i faith? It's quite modern, but has it been persecuted for a long time in Iran, or is that something that arose with the Islamic Revolution?

IS: The Baha'i faith, as you mentioned, is a relatively new religion. It was born in Iran, but it's now a global community. There are Baha'is in every country and in most cities in the world. Baha'is believe in the oneness of humankind, freedom of opinion, in the equality of men and women, and in the harmony of science and religion. Baha'is also believe that divine educators or manifestations of God—Abraham, Krishna, Zoroaster, Moses, Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, and Baha'u'llah (whom Baha'is believe is the latest of these messengers so far)—come from the same source. In essence, these religions are different manifestations of one truth and are all from God.

The Baha'i community in Iran has been persecuted since its birth—mainly because of their convictions. Originally, persecution against the Baha'i community arose from their belief in oneness and gender equality, for example. Their ideas weren't acceptable to the religious understanding of the era, or of that specific geography. Over time, the persecution of Baha'is took various forms. After the Islamic Revolution it intensified: over 200 Baha'is were executed over false accusations such as spying for Israel or promoting corruption on Earth.

CJLPA: What has been the main reason for persecution of the Baha'is in Iran?

IS: This persecution is still religious in its nature, but, for example, Baha'is have long been accused of being Israeli spies, because their holiest shrine is in Israel. If someone knows the history, however, they would know that the Baha'i faith was born in Iran, about a century before the existence of Israel and that Baha'u'llah was exiled to Palestine by two Muslim rulers – the Qajar rulers of Iran and the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire. This was decades before the establishment of Israel. A finite number who had followed Baha'u'llah into exile remained there and later the Baha'i World Centre was established there to assist in the management of Baha'i community affairs. The accusation of spying for Israel arises from ignorance and the fact that Baha'is have never had freedom of the press in Iran. They aren't able to defend themselves or to raise awareness of their own ideas or principles. In the public sphere, many Iranians think that Baha'is do not believe in chastity, but this is a slanderous lie promoted by the clerics to incite hatred and justify persecuting the Baha'is. Anti-Baha'i organisations in Iran hold the freedom to promote these false accusations through national TV, radio or newspapers, but Baha'is were never granted the opportunity to respond. Instead, they were imprisoned or exiled.

But I think the situation has changed in the last few decades. Baha'is now have access to global media, where they can share the true principles and values of Baha'i Faith. Now, more of the Iranian people know that the Baha'i Faith has millions of followers all over the world. However, in Iran, Baha'is still don't have access to the national media or the press and unfortunately, lots of hate speech still takes place every day in Iran against them.

CJLPA: When you started campaigning for equal education rights, had you heard about these issues facing Baha'is before experiencing them first-hand? Was it something you knew about, or was it your experience that led you to take action?

IS: I had heard about it—my mother was expelled from university in the early years of the revolution, so I knew that Baha'is weren't allowed to access higher education. Although the Baha'is are the largest community deprived from education in Iran, there are others who have also been denied a right to education. In 2006, however, when my application to university was unsuccessful, there were 600 Baha'is turned down, just in that year.

CJLPA: How does that take place? Does the government have records of who is Baha'i? Do you have to state it when you take the national exam?

IS: I don't know how the government finds out. It's not difficult, really, because if you ask a Baha'i if they are Baha'i or not, of course they would say: 'Yes, I'm Baha'i'. One of the principles of the Baha'i Faith is truthfulness, because it fosters social capital and is the foundation of all human virtues.

CJLPA: When you took the exam, did you suspect that you would be barred?

IS: Yes, but I wanted to try my absolute best. I dedicated a full year and a half to studying intensely all day and night before the exam, on the off chance that things would go differently this year and I would be allowed to go to university. I had very good grades. But it didn't happen.

CJLPA: Clearly it paid off somehow, since you're now doing your PhD! Was it difficult to transfer to Sussex University for your Masters?

IS: It was difficult because the BIHE is not recognised by the Iranian Education Department or Ministry. When you apply for higher education in other countries, in most cases, you are asked to provide the name of your previous university. As a Baha'i from Iran, you have to explain in depth to the institution that you are applying to that although the BIHE isn't recognised as an official university, it functions just like one. I don't know of any other such university or higher educational institution in the world.

CJLPA: It is a very unique concept. There are universities that don't even exist in some countries, where you can pay to receive a degree, but they don't even have lecturers. It's funny that this can exist, but you can't have recognition of the BIHE as a legitimate educational institution.

IS: Exactly. Luckily, nowadays, there are a growing number of prestigious universities that have accepted Baha'i students from BIHE. On the website of the BIHE there is a list compiling these, with universities such as Harvard, Yale, the University of California, Columbia, the University of Chicago and so on—and that's just in the United States.

CJLPA: How many Baha'i citizens do you think have been deprived of higher education overall?

IS: That's very difficult to estimate. Not everyone speaks about it. Every year though, hundreds of Baha'i students are turned down from university and now this is a multi-generational problem, so it is fair to say thousands and thousands of the Baha'is have been deprived of higher education.

CJLPA: When you started campaigning for the universal right to education in Iran, you went to all of these institutions, all of these public services—was there any one event that led to your arrest in 2010, or was it something that built up gradually?

IS: We were a group of Baha'i students actively asking for our rights. In 2010, as you mentioned, a number of us were arrested along with some other non-Baha'i human rights activists. This happened very suddenly, and I never anticipated anything like it because every single thing we were doing was completely legal.

CJLPA: Your measured attempt to obtain equal education rights was met with aggression and violence.

IS: It was, and not just towards us. In the next couple of years, many other Baha'i students were threatened with intimidating messages, or arrested. I was arrested in 2010 and interrogated for 72 days. They kept me in solitary confinement, all day, for that entire period. It was very difficult. I was even tortured physically and psychologically. I was just 21 years old. The conditions in which we were kept were horrifying. It was neither a formal nor a peaceful detention. When we were arrested, it felt like a kidnapping. It took place in the middle of the night in a dark street, and I wasn't told why I was being arrested. My parents had no idea where I was, and for the next 10 days they were searching everywhere for me.

CJLPA: That's terrifying.

IS: I didn't even know where I was, because I was taken to Tehran, a considerable distance from the city where I lived. One night, after the interrogations started, I was beaten extensively and forced to wear a blindfold. I never actually saw my interrogator's face, or the people who were beating me. I didn't even know what objects they were beating me with. I remember the first day they started the beatings—it was eleven in the morning and it continued until sunset. When I was returned to solitary confinement, I felt immense pain in my entire body. My main question was: 'What have I done?'. The pain subsided after a few days, but the question never left my mind. At the time, they were attempting to get a video confession out of us: that, for example, we had participated in various demonstrations. They wanted us to confess that we were ordered by Baha'i institutions to be present at protests against the government. This was when the Green Movement² was taking place. But it was all false. We resisted the confession, despite the pain. To have agreed to the interview would have meant an admission of guilt, for something we had never done.

Following the 72 days of interrogation, I was released and taken to court. When I informed the general prosecutor that I had been tortured in detention, he just laughed in my face. It was shocking, and extremely embarrassing because he represented the final authority that I could have turned to for justice. I think this kind of attitude has become systematic in various kinds of persecution against a wide variety of citizens in Iran.

In court, it was like another interrogation. The judge was questioning me and insulting me—he was completely biased. He sentenced me to five years of imprisonment. I was accused of being a member of a 'misled Baha'i sect', and an illegal group. It was just a made-up charge.

² The Green Movement, or Green Wave, was a political movement that arose after the 2009 Iranian presidential elections, demanding the removal of Ahmadinejad from office.

I was 22 when I was brought to court. I couldn't believe that I was going to be sentenced for five years of prison for absolutely nothing.

CJLPA: When you should have been at university.

IS: Exactly. I was asking to go to university and they sentenced me to jail. When I was granted an appeal but the verdict was reiterated, it was an even greater shock. The second court hadn't even read my file. They just confirmed it.

I was in prison from 2012-2017. It was a very difficult time. It was tough, but I learned a lot in those years because I was in prison with many other political prisoners and prisoners of conscience from different backgrounds. Funnily enough, the relative majority of the prisoners were Baha'i. Baha'is were no longer a minority in prison!

CJLPA: Did you find a sense of community? Did you make any good friends?

IS: In that particular sense, it was a good time. Of course, it was tough, the sanitary conditions were awful and the food was terrible. We didn't have access to a phone. We couldn't call our families or friends. Added to the pressure of living in a very, very small place with many people – all male – it was hard.

I tell my friends that when you love someone and have chosen to live together, you may have disagreements from time to time, but you always have the possibility of getting a coffee or having a walk in the park. But in prison we hadn't chosen each other, we weren't in love with each other, and we didn't have any opportunities to leave. We had to stay in each other's company for 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 52 weeks a year, for five years. Many prisoners had much longer sentences than mine: some were there for 10 or 15 years. I was living in a room with two friends who had been given execution sentences. You can probably understand how difficult it would be to have that death sentence hanging over you and to be summoned one day...

Everyone was going through a very hard time. But even in that space, you had to be kind, to serve them, and to listen to them. Although we were all very distressed, I tried to be as friendly and helpful as possible to my friends who were in there. Unfortunately, both of my roommates were executed in 2018.

CJLPA: I'm so sorry to hear that.

IS: You can begin to understand the pressure that everyone was under: this was the negative and difficult aspect of prison. And though it's ironic to talk about the positive side of prison, we could talk to people from different backgrounds, with people who had never associated with Baha'is. Some of them were political activists, but had never had met any Baha'is. Some didn't even know that Baha'is had been deprived of a right to education. Can you believe it? They were political commentators and they hadn't heard of that fact. Earlier I discussed how the Iranian government had been trying to maintain people's ignorance about Baha'i ideas and the Baha'i situation in Iran. They were somehow successful, because these political activists knew absolutely nothing about it.

Anyway, we had a unique opportunity to talk amongst ourselves. Some of them felt estranged in the early days. But after that, the feeling evaporated, because we were living together and they could see my life, my attitude towards various things, and my love for

them. We tried to help them correct their misunderstandings, to bring us closer together. It wasn't as if they were just learning from us, either. We tried to go beyond an idea of 'us and them', and there was a lot that we, as Baha'is, learned from these different political activists in prison. Baha'is learned that they ought to be even more active in various civil spheres which Baha'is had previously thought inaccessible. We are now all close friends, and have the amazing privilege of being able to call each other whenever it's necessary.

I think it was a big step for the Baha'i community in Iran, actually, to have been able to meet these people and to have had the opportunity to exchange so many ideas about Iran's future. How could we engender a more diverse and inclusive society? How could we be more united, since Iran is made up of so many different ethnicities, ideas and religions? The fact that we were stuck together also represented an amazing opportunity to reflect on these cardinal subjects.

CJLPA: It may be difficult to talk about this, but what was your daily routine like?

IS: It's not difficult. It's still part of my life, unfortunately, because many of my friends remain in prison. Everyone had his own schedule. You could sleep during the day and work at midnight. The important thing was to respect the privacy of others, because it was so hard to find. Not having a room to yourself, everyone had to respect each other.

I tried to get up early in the morning and to study. We sometimes struggled to get books brought into the prison, since each one had to be reviewed by the director, who often vetoed them. You can understand why the head of the prison didn't exactly want us to be happy there. It was difficult, because we wanted to read, to study, to walk even. We only had two or three hours a day in the yard where we were allowed to get some fresh air. You could run, if you had shoes, but no-one was actually allowed to have them inside the prison. That was an added challenge. It was a very small yard, with only one tree at its centre and no grass. They even cut down the tree after two or three years.

As a service to prisoners, I distributed the prison meals twice a day. I was so ashamed during lunch and dinner because the food was absolutely terrible. I had to convince people to come each time, to encourage them to eat, and they were always disappointed. But someone had to do it.

CJLPA: In terms of facilities, did you have a library, or a reading room?

IS: Actually, the books were all kept in various rooms. For example, when I managed to import some books for myself, I kept them in mine. You had to keep up to date with which books were in whose room. It was also, of course, dependent on your relationship with people. If you knew them, you could borrow a book from them. We didn't have many books and our options were really limited. But they were from different contexts, so if you wanted to you could read across a wide array of subjects.

CJLPA: You're now doing your PhD at Cambridge, with almost limitless access to any book that you like. What did you choose to write about?

IS: I'm writing on the concept of decline in the writings of Iranian intellectuals of the 20th century. If someone in prison had told me that I would be doing my PhD at Cambridge in three years' time, I wouldn't have believed it. One day you're in prison because of your struggles for the universal right to higher education, and then three years later you find yourself at one of the most famous universities in the world.

CJLPA: How do you remain in contact with the Baha'i community in the UK?

IS: The UK has a strong Baha'i community. They organise different community-building activities that aim to build capacity in people to become protagonists of the wellbeing of their community and society. These activities are open to everyone. Baha'is welcome members of the public, so that they can consult and reflect together on how best to promote justice in society, to build unified communities, to apply the principles of gender equality in different settings of family, work and so on.

There is a focus at the grassroots level on community-building and social activities, in order to empower people, but the Baha'i community in the UK is also trying to contribute to different discourses such as social cohesion, the role of the media, freedom of religion and belief and so on, and to collaborate with various actors of civil society.

CJLPA: If there were one thing that people reading this interview should walk away with, what would you like them to share with other people, to raise awareness of?

IS: I think the most important thing is the concept of universal participation, to understand that every human being has a potential that should be released through education, and that it is our duty to help everyone access that right. In a healthy body, all the cells are involved in the body's well-being. The body itself supports all cells by feeding them, so it's also a mutual relationship. In our society, if you want to have a healthy society, all the cells, the different citizens of the world should be educated and empowered, so that their potential can materialise and they can work in promotion of the public good. That's how I perceive the main role of education and it is probably the ultimate goal of my activities.

CJLPA: I wanted to ask you one last personal question. Being away from home is an important theme in Iranian popular music, for example in LA and other exile communities. Is there a song that that you particularly associate with Iran, that makes you think of home?

IS: There is a very famous song by Shajarian, called Morgh-e Sahar. The main idea expressed in the song is one of optimism for the future and taking steps towards overcoming the barriers in our way. I think that's something we should always keep in mind. There are many difficulties or challenges in our lives, and I think we need to nurture this optimism. We should also be systematic, of course, with evolving conceptual frameworks that are fostered both by spiritual principles and scientific knowledge.

CJLPA: You remain hopeful about the future of Baha'is in Iran, and their education. You have to, in a way, don't you?

IS: Yes, that's an indispensable part of any kind of desire for change. We need to keep going on, and I think this song fosters both hope and action, so that we can all take part in the betterment of the world, and build a brighter future.

Casper Alexander Sanderson has received an MA (Hons) in Arabic, Persian and Russian at the University of St Andrews, as well as an MPhil in Modern Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Cambridge, for which he was awarded the Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Studentship Grant.
