

Various sources give different figures for the number of Babi and Bahai martyrs in Iran, most of whom were Babis killed in the 19th century. The figures range from 4,000 up to 20,000. Is one or other figure official? Can we explain the discrepancies?

To: Baha'i Studies <bahai-st@list.jccc.edu>
Subject: **The number of martyrs**
Date sent: Fri, 23 Nov 2007 13:24:47 +0100

On 23 Nov 2007 XX wrote:

> A while ago I was part of a Baha'i history discussion forum. To my
> surprise I found that there was full agreement from a number of
> prominent Baha'i scholars that the number of Babi/Baha'i martyrs was
> much less than the normal figure of 20,000, probably two or three
> thousand if I recall.

I think that is low: we can account for about 4000 I think, and presume that there are a small number not counted, but not many. The Babi-Bahai community was quite good at remembering its martyrs and recording them.

> figure of 20,000 doesn't just come from Baha'i individuals.
> Apparently 'Abdu'l-Baha gave the figure, and Shoghi Effendi did.

In the Traveler's narrative, Abdu'l-Baha says:

Now in these years [A.H. one thousand two hundred and] sixty-six and sixty-seven throughout all Persia fire fell on the households of the Babis, and each one of them, in whatever hamlet he might be, was, on the slightest suspicion arising, put to the sword. More than four thousand souls were slain, and a great multitude of women and children, left without protector or helper, distracted and confounded, were trodden down and destroyed.

Abdu'l-Baha's figure lines up very closely with the actual numbers that can be counted - 4000 or a little more. But notice that he also says that multitude of women and children were left defenseless and destroyed. Some may actually have died, some may simply have suffered so much that they are to be considered martyrs. Iran at that time was subject to famines, and in some regions many people died -- particularly those without a "protector or helper." Weakened people die of disease, as well as hunger. It is not impossible that the Babi community suffered losses of around 20,000 people, and that the number actually executed -- mainly the adult men -- was 4 to 5 thousand.

In the Will and Testament, Abdu'l-Baha says "Ten thousand souls have shed streams of their sacred blood in this path, their precious lives they offered in sacrifice unto Him," and Shoghi Effendi echoes this in *God Passes By*: "It is characterized by nine years of fierce and relentless contest, whose theatre was the whole of Persia, in which above ten thousand heroes laid down their lives" (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, p. xiv)

So there is nothing "canonical" about the figure of 20,000 martyrs, other figures are also given in authoritative Bahai texts. And there is nothing surprising about a 4-fold variance between different counts, when none of them specify exactly what is being counted, and

some do not even specify an exact period

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