

**A TALE OF RESILIENCE: A DOCUMENTARY ON BAHA'I  
PERSECUTION**

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A Thesis  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
San Diego State University

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in  
Television, Film, and New Media Production

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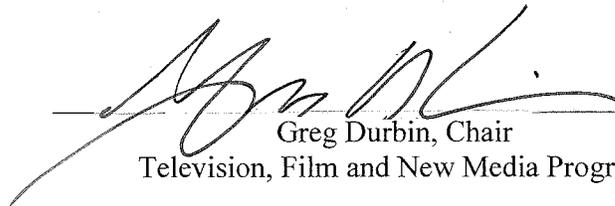
by  
Mesaq Kazimi  
Spring 2013

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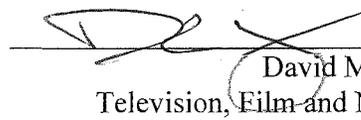
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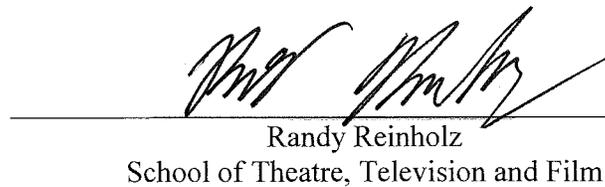
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Greg Durbin, Chair  
Television, Film and New Media Program



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David Morong  
Television, Film and New Media Program



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Randy Reinholz  
School of Theatre, Television and Film

*May 6, 2013*  
Approval Date

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## **DEDICATION**

Dedicated to my parents for the countless years of service and their unconditional support of my personal endeavor.

## **ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS**

A Tale of Resilience: A Documentary on Baha'i Persecution

by

Masaq Kazimi

Master of Arts in Television, Film, and New Media Production

San Diego State University, 2013

Since the advent of the Baha'i Faith in 1863, its founders and followers have faced severe and systematic persecution in the country of its origin – Iran. And now, having been established as a belief system that strives for the betterment of society around the globe, the Iranian Baha'i community has become the target of a violent campaign endorsed and carried out by the Islamic Republic of Iran. While the state-sponsored acts of terror against the country's largest religious minority continue, members of the Baha'i Faith adhere to a strict code of nonviolent practices that has allowed them to survive in a land where they are deprived of basic citizens' and human rights.

This documentary reveals two dimensions of the persecution of the Baha'i community: first, it illustrates what it means to be a victim of religious discrimination by depicting the personal story of Fariba Kamalabadi, who was imprisoned in 2008 and currently serves a twenty-year sentence; and second, the film explores the specific teachings and practices that the Baha'i community has adopted to maintain unity and to be resilient under these circumstances.

Thus, the film explores, in the light of sociological and philosophical studies, the historical and political implications of nonviolent theory as a means of social change through the narrative of the Baha'is situation Iran.

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## CHAPTER 1

### STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

*A Tale of Resilience* is a documentary about the ongoing persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran. The story is told by Shahla and Iraj Kamalabadi, the mother and brother of Fariba Kamalabadi, who is one of the seven Bahá'í leaders currently in prison. Highlighting beliefs and practices that emphasize nonviolence as a means of resistance, the film examines the history of Bahá'í struggle through personal narratives and expert observations.

Since the inception of the Bahá'í Faith in Iran in 1863, its followers have endured intense persecution at the hands of Iranian governments, beginning with the Qajar Dynasty (1794–1920) and continuing through the Pahlavi Dynasty (1922–1979) to the Islamic Republic (1980–present). Regardless of the ruling system, the Bahá'í Faith has never been tolerated due to the popular belief that Muhammad was the final prophet (*Khatam 'ul-nabien*) sent to humanity from God and that therefore any new revelation is deemed fraudulent (*Mazhab-e Zaleh*) (Momen 16). When the Bahá'í Faith emerged in Iran some one hundred and fifty years ago, the officials of the time perceived it as a movement against the religion of Islam and, more importantly, an attack on the clerical establishment of the *mullahs*. Since the Bahá'í Faith does not adhere to a similar religious hierarchy, and promotes the personal investigation and acceptance of religious belief, the clerics would no longer have a role to play and would therefore lose the position of leadership they occupy today.

The film draws on themes relating to religious freedom, personal liberties, and nonviolent resistance over a period of a century. It highlights how the Iranian government has used propaganda to present Bahá'ís as enemies of Islam and the state. In fact, Bahá'ís living in Iran have followed their spiritual teachings of resisting involvement in partisan politics, abiding by the constitution of their country, and avoiding religious dissimulation (*Taqiah*), even in the face of intense torture (Momen 39).

The concept of enduring hardship and not reciprocating the methods of the oppressor has had many advantages for the Bahá'í community. For example, since the 1979 revolution, the citizens of Iran have blindly accepted the information given to them by their authorities

about the Bahá'ís; however, in recent times, the situation has changed: people have become aware of government propaganda and as a result have become supportive of Bahá'ís, both inside and outside of Iran ("Swelling Chorus").

The film has its genesis in recent events and developments in Iran. In 2008, the persecution of Bahá'ís received renewed media attention when the government arrested and imprisoned seven elected leaders of the Bahá'í community on false charges. The seven, known as the *Yaran* (Friends), were charged with heresy against Islam and espionage for Israel, both punishable by death according to the constitutional laws. After two years in prison without a speedy or proper trial, they finally received a court date in August 2010. All of them were found guilty of both crimes and given twenty-year sentences. The seven are Fariba Kamalabadi, Jamaloddin Khanjani, Afif Naeimi, Saeid Rezaie, Behrouz Tavakkoli, Vahid Tizfahm and Mahvash Sabet ("MRG Concerned by Reports"). Besides the seven leaders currently in Iran's notorious Evin Prison, about fifty other Bahá'ís have been arrested and imprisoned without a trial. The rest of the community is under regular attack, continually harassed by mobs and the government, and less frequently by ordinary citizens ("Wave of Arson Attacks"). Despite the intensity of the persecutions in recent years, however, Bahá'ís have been able to continue their peaceful and nonviolent resistance within the region.

Nonviolence is at the core of the philosophy of thinkers and activists such as Henry Thoreau, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King, Jr., and today the concept continues to resonate profoundly with perhaps most people. Recent uprisings such as the "Arab Spring," using nonviolent techniques to protest against the state authorities, attest to this claim. The documentary at hand, while reflecting on tactics used in the past and in recent years, will draw on specific Bahá'í teachings about nonviolent resistance, or more accurately *nonviolence resilience*, a practice that has kept the community strong. These specific teachings and spiritual instructions of Bahá'ís can be summarized in a few simple principles: (1) enduring repression and punishment without verbally or physically attacking the oppressor, (2) not denying one's faith or modifying one's beliefs, while demanding equal rights, (3) not participating in partisan politics that will cause disunity within the community, and (4) being law-abiding citizens (Karlberg 10). These codes, and other practices, have encouraged the Bahá'ís of Iran to shun the behavior of their oppressors in their quest for equality.

## **STATEMENT OF THE SUBPROBLEM**

The initial challenge was to make this film appealing and understandable for a general audience unfamiliar with the historical and political context of Bahá'í suffering. Since the religion is not widely known in the United States, it was difficult for people to identify personally with the characters and their stories. It was also challenging to deal with a vast amount of information and sort through innumerable facts and opinions to make the account concise and credible. Another challenge was to clearly differentiate between the political aspirations of the aforementioned “nonviolent resistance” movements, intended to overthrow the ruling regime, and the Bahá'í Faith's apolitical approach, meant to bring about civil liberties and equal rights for the ethnic and religious minorities of Iran.

The film presents facts and statistics alongside personal narratives intended to have a strong emotional impact to make the story engaging. It incorporates stylistic elements from popular documentaries that lend inspiration to this film: *Fog of War*, *What the Bleep Do We Know*, and *San Soeil*. While *A Tale of Resilience* employs conventional methods of documentary style so as to be an informative film, it also aims at being experimental and entertaining to keep viewers engaged as the story unfolds. For example, the opening scene of the film where the camera focuses on the hands of the mother and nothing else recalls the way *San Soeil* introduces its characters in the first few scenes.

Furthermore, the film was initially meant to be part of a social movement that includes a number of activities aimed at freeing the seven imprisoned Yaran. These initiatives, which may or may not start after the film's premiere, include petitioning various governments to issue statements on the situation, coordinating conferences and events, holding prayer meetings, writing articles for newspapers and online blogs, and using television and other media outlets to inform an even wider public. Thus, it is essential to have the necessary human resources and a solid marketing plan in place before we move to the marketing and distribution stage of the project.

## **GOALS AND OBJECTIVES**

The goal of this documentary was to make a statement that would fuel the ongoing social movement for human rights in Iran. While the film can be considered an advocacy

product, it exploits multiple filmmaking techniques to ensure that it is not boring, but can be enjoyed as an entertaining, provocative, and informative act of expression.

As to the social relevance of the project, the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran and the nonviolent approach of the community are perhaps not issues that many people are aware of; viewers may find it intriguing to watch and learn about this unique topic through the research presented in *A Tale of Resilience*. Moreover, the film highlights a very pressing and timely issue that the Bahá'í community and other organizations involved with human rights are facing inside of Iran. And it illuminates the implications and nature of religious persecution in a broader context, as it is witnessed in the twenty-first century.

The audience may be shocked to learn that organized religious persecution, which many think of as extinct, is very much alive and active. A Canadian senator stated, “We are watching genocide in slow-motion in Iran” (Ostroff). The viewer may be equally intrigued to learn that the theory and practice of nonviolent resistance as used by Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., share many similarities with the Bahá'í approach, and that it continues to bear fruit in other parts of the world, including Iran.

The documentary's importance lies in its revelation of a group of individuals who are suffering on a daily basis for their religious beliefs. Those concerned with establishing equality and justice may be moved to take action, either by asking their authorities to pressure the Islamic Republic to release the prisoners or by simply raising an awareness that could lead to other individual initiatives.

While the film serves primarily as a potential advocacy product, the secondary goal is to make it an artistically successful film. I intend to exhibit the film initially in film festivals at its original length, though if it is picked up for distribution for either television or cable, it may have to be shortened to 23 minutes. Lastly, Internet distribution is the most plausible and perhaps most appropriate venue for a film that tries to reach a wide range of audiences. Since the marketing will also rely heavily on word-of-mouth and audience-recommended online sharing, the chances of success in fulfilling its original purpose may be higher via the Internet.

Additionally, the film has been produced as a presentable piece that can compete against other documentaries that deal with similar or even more popular human-rights issues, such as the child soldiers in Africa, human-trafficking in South America, and victims of the

Israel-Palestine conflict. Since *A Tale of Resilience* is meant to reach a wide range of people within its target audience, it is constructed to appeal to viewers of a variety of tastes, from someone attracted to a personal crucible story to another driven by political or social action. It is also designed to provoke thought and bring the inherent conflict of the situation to the foreground.

The end goal is to call people to action on whatever scale and manner possible, based on their capacity and situation. If the film succeeds in its proposed goals, it will surpass its geopolitical boundaries and become an agent of change. Then, as an advocacy piece, it can be used to call attention to the issue throughout the world via Internet distribution, local showcases, and possibly even major television and theater distribution --or a combination thereof.

To conclude, general awareness of the Bahá'í predicament affects the Bahá'í community's circumstances and treatment in Iran. If more people express their objections to the current Iranian policies on this issue, the Islamic Republic may respond to international pressure, as it has previously in numerous cases. Roxana Saberi and Maziar Bahari, American and Canadian journalists of Iranian origin who were imprisoned in Iran, are recent examples of the potential impact of international human rights campaigns. Ultimately, *A Tale of Resilience* is anticipated to contribute to the ongoing discourse on Bahá'í rights in Iran.

## **DEFINITIONS OF TERMS**

### Topic Terms:

- **Activist video** - A work utilized by someone campaigning for social change.
- **Advocacy documentary** - the act of arguing in favor of or supporting something using film.
- **Bahá'í Faith** - A religion founded in 1863 in Persia and currently with six million adherents around the globe.
- **Bahá'ís** - Followers of the Bahá'í Faith or, literally, "followers of light." There are 300,000 Bahá'ís in Iran, making them the largest minority group there.
- **Constructive resilience** - A term used to explain the Bahá'í approach more accurately. In a *resilience* approach, the victims do not protest against the authority of the government, but seek to change laws that concern their livelihood.

- *Human rights* - The basic rights and freedoms that all humans should be guaranteed, such as the rights to life and liberty, freedom of thought and expression, and equality before the law.
- *Islam* - A religion founded in the Arabian Peninsula. It is currently the world's second largest religion with more than two billion followers. Many Muslims believe that Islam was the last religion revealed to humanity and that therefore any "religion" emerging after Muhammad's revelation must be false and its progenitor lacking in divinity.
- *Nonviolence* - A philosophy that rejects the use of violence and instead seeks to bring about change through peaceful responses, even to violent acts.
- *Persecution* - A program or campaign to subjugate or eliminate a specific group of people, often based on race, religion, sexuality, or social beliefs.
- *Iran* - A country in the Middle East, with an Islamic-based Constitution since the revolution of 1979.
- *Satyagraha/Ahimsa* - A Sanskrit word and a Buddhist/Hindu concept meaning "non-violent." Gandhi popularized the terms through his speeches and writings and encouraged people to resist oppression through non-violent actions.
- *Yaran* (Friends) - A committee of seven individuals appointed to carry out the administrative works of the Bahá'ís in Iran. The Yaran are currently imprisoned with a 20-year life sentence.

#### Film Terms:

- *Cinéma vérité* - A style of cinema that appears to be realistic, showing ordinary people in ordinary situations, speaking normal dialogue. Cinéma vérité is not so much about ordinary people and situations as it is about the manner in which the material is captured and the relationship of the filmmaker to the subject. In contrast to direct cinema, which purports to capture events in as unobtrusive a manner as possible, allowing the subjects to behave in as "normal" a way as possible, the CV filmmaker interacts with the subject, often with the intention of provoking a response from it. The filmmaker, in other words, participates in the shaping of the narrative. Moreover it uses the camera to force subjects to reveal the truth.
- *Editing* - Changing, retouching, fixing up, or altering raw footage to form a continuous film.
- *Expository mode* - The expository mode diverges sharply from the poetic mode in terms of visual practice and story-telling devices by virtue of its emphasis on rhetorical content, and its goals of information dissemination or persuasion. Narration is a mark of this mode.
- *Montage* - An art form consisting of putting together or assembling various shots or images to create an integrated sequence, often organized around a theme. Unlike conventional narrative editing, montages tend to be impressionistic or elliptical, often linking narrative elements with abbreviated exposition.

- *Participatory mode* - In this mode, the documentarian moves onto the screen, dropping the mask of objectivity worn by the observational-mode documentarist.

### **DELIMITATIONS**

*A Tale of Resilience* is not intended to be a propaganda film about the Bahá'í Faith, nor does it aim to change viewers' religious beliefs. The film is not financed by any Bahá'í institutions, groups or individual, nor did any entity other than myself have control over the editing process or the final film. Moreover, it is not a one-sided film based solely on individual opinions; rather, it is composed of verifiable facts traceable to various reputable sources. These sources include perspectives from both Bahá'í and non-Bahá'í organizations and media agencies. In addition, it cannot be labeled as a "religious" film, and thus rejected by the general audience and confined to a limited circle of people who are interested only in niche topics. And finally, it does not appear as, or give a sense of being, a "small" or student film.

Secondly, I am bound by the teachings of the Bahá'í Faith myself and therefore did not disrespect, falsely accuse, or step outside the bounds of nonviolence to prove my point in this film. While acquiring facts from primary Bahá'í sources, I ensured that the same information could also be accessed, wherever possible, by a neutral organization. As a result, the facts and research reflected in the film come from organizations such as the United Nations, Amnesty International, the non-Bahá'í lawyer Shirin Ebadi, and other human rights watch organizations. Through-verification of the information from my sources, I tried to verify the data from the Bahá'ís with whom I conducted research. So while an "insider," I worked to keep a necessary distance from the subjects to pursue them with accuracy and objectivity.

Furthermore, as an insider, I have had previous exposure to the topic and to the practices of the community in general. That, of course, comes with its own advantages and limitations; in order to assure neutrality, I sought help from the thesis committee and other "outsiders" to ensure that the film stay true to its initial goals, avoiding unbalanced personal opinions.

In particular, the film is not a political attack on the citizens or the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The film is non-obtrusive in its approach --meaning it does not intentionally attack or ridicule the government as a means of revenge for what it is doing.

The film does not, through editing or various other techniques, try to alter the images or words of the Iranian officials to make them sound illogical, obtuse, or unintelligent--a practice that is common, for example, in the political ads for various political campaigns in the United States.

While exploring the persecution issue, the film does not cover the Iranian government's nuclear ambitions or its stance on other political topics, such as the United States' foreign policy. The film tries to steer away from existing political frameworks within which Iran's actions have been analyzed and criticized by the West, using labels such as "Axis of Evil."

Besides the Bahá'ís, other discriminated minorities in Iran include Jews, Christians, Zoroastrians, Kurds, and homosexuals ("Swelling Chorus"). However, due to the limits of time and the scope of the project, this film was unable to explore the stories of these groups in detail. At the same time, the narratives of suffering of these groups overlap, as some Bahá'ís are also Kurdish or Jewish.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE PROJECT**

The significance of *A Tale of Resilience*, as of every documentary, lies in its ability to impact the viewers on multiple levels. First, it appeals to the viewers' intellectual side by providing them with intriguing, often little-known, and thought-provoking findings about an Iran and a Bahá'í community that have very much in common with the ideals of freedom grounding the American constitution. The film achieves this by presenting reliable information based on research from people who have experienced the life firsthand and are sharing their vision on camera with the world. It further invites the viewer to investigate the topic independently in order to ensure that the claims made therein are accurate. More affirmatively, the film explores various styles and techniques of the filmmaker's craft--explained further in Chapter Two--to present the content in an original and creative manner.

The film situates itself among a number of recent documentaries that deal with socially relevant issues. In the past few years, documentaries have become a very prominent and popular form of cinematic expression in American culture; this film hopes to contribute to that medium and to leave a mark in that process. Films like *Food Inc.*, *Restrepo*, *Waste Land*, and *Inside Job* have all collectively opened the viewer's eyes to aspects of society that

need attention and improvement. *A Tale of Resilience* hopes to join this cinematic discourse by presenting and discussing social issues in a motion picture.

In addition, the current uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa situate this thesis in the middle of ongoing historical events, giving the film the potential to attract the attention of socially concerned target audiences.

The film will be of significance as it deeply touches upon pathos, ethos, and logos. Through the personal stories of Fariba Kamalabadi family members, it resonates with the audience's emotions. By including voices of honesty and authority from the expert interviewees, it convinces the viewer of its authenticity and urgency. Through logic and common sense about basic human rights, the film encourages its viewers to take action about an issue that they have come to care about and to support characters they can empathize with.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE ON THE PROJECT TOPIC

The project has used a range of critical analysis methods to explore the topic. These include research in sociology and philosophy pertaining to examining the historical and political implications of nonviolent movements for social change. The academic approach to the topic will provide the film with credible evidence for presenting itself as an accurate piece of nonfiction. To accomplish this, I relied on three significant texts, along with a number of pertinent articles.

#### SOCIOLOGY

The first area of study for *A Tale of Resilience* is sociology. The film examines the social behavior of one group of people towards another, in this particular case, a majority's authoritative control over a minority that has not shown any measure of physical resistance. The film reflects on power structures and social dominance in light of the ongoing persecution of the Bahá'ís, a minority both in numbers and in influence in the country of Iran. Authors Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto explain the concepts of social dominance in relation to human behavior in their book *Social Dominance: An Intergroup Theory of Social Hierarchy and Oppression*. In the book, they present three ways in which one social group can practice dominance over another. These categories are (1) age-based: adults having more power than children; (2) gender-based: men currently having social dominance over women; and (3) arbitrary-based: a group of people who feel justified on the basis of their own beliefs or ideologies to practice dominance over another (261). The third category applies to the marginalization of Bahá'ís and other Iranian minorities. In this case, both the clerical establishment and the government of Iran have decided that certain behaviors or beliefs will not be accepted in the region. Thus, the Bahá'í Faith and its teachings are strictly prohibited in the country and subject to punitive consequences.

The author of an article highlights these specific punishments and legal actions against the Bahá'ís in detail. Michael Karlberg, in "Constructive Resilience: The Bahá'í

Response to Oppression," lists actions that make Bahá'ís the "target of recurrent waves of hostile propaganda and censorship, social ostracism and exclusion" (14). The Bahá'ís are also denied their right to higher education and legal employment as well as to due process before the law. Karlberg delves into the impact of humiliation and insecurity (stemming from the lack of civil vindication) when Bahá'ís become the target of citizen-based criminal action. He lists a few examples of such events, including "property looting and destruction, government seizure of individual and collective assets, arson, incitements to mob violence, arbitrary arrests and imprisonments, physical and psychological torture, death threats, executions, and disappearances" (19).

In depicting the lives and experiences of Iranian Bahá'ís, particularly those of Fariba Kamalabadi, the film explores the social dominance of the Iranian government and Muslim religious leaders in eliminating or reducing the presence of an unwanted group of people, an ongoing behavior practiced against the Bahá'ís of Iran since the late eighteenth century.

### **PHILOSOPHY**

The second area of critical analysis forming the backbone of the documentary is philosophy. *A Tale of Resilience* examines the philosophical beliefs of the Iranian Bahá'ís and the strategies they use in the face of discrimination. In his article, Karlberg mentions certain teachings that the Bahá'ís have adhered to over the years. These teachings include their "collective commitment to the oneness of humanity; recognition of the spiritual and material dimensions of human reality; [and] a long-term perspective accompanied by faith, patience, and perseverance" (Karlberg 20). The group rejects all forms of social and political action that are adversarial and can ultimately lead to division. Karlberg also emphasizes their pledge of faithfulness to the laws of the land the Bahá'ís live in, their perseverance in cultivating their spiritual behavior, and their reliance on God. The article then lists some social aspects of the teachings, including "the peaceful construction of viable, alternative institutional models; the steady attraction of others who are invited voluntarily to embrace these patterns of individual and collective life; a posture of constructive resilience in the face of violent oppression; [and] a commitment to meet hatred and persecution with love and kindness" (26). According to the author, the Bahá'ís accept that their adversity and hardship will lead to their personal and collective growth. Ultimately, they believe, one must be

continuously and actively serving the community and the world, even under oppressive conditions.

As described above, philosophy, or more specifically religious philosophy, plays a major role in explaining the concepts in the film. Philosophical reasoning for the community's resilience shapes more than half the film, exploring the constructive mentality and outlook of Bahá'ís towards oppression. At the end, the film showcases the specific applications of the Bahá'í philosophy in the form of its followers' actual practices.

### **HISTORY AND POLITICS**

The third area of study is the examination of the recent history, political implications, and importance of nonviolent reaction as practiced by Bahá'ís and other historical and political figures such as Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mahatma Gandhi. In a study of violent and nonviolent movements throughout the world from the 1900s to 2006, authors Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan demonstrate that, while violent rebellions have had about a 25 percent success rate, nonviolent movements have had about a 50 percent success rate over the past few decades (6). The source concludes that the increased efficacy of nonviolent movements is due to two factors.

First, “nonviolent methods enhance [a movement's] domestic and international legitimacy and encourage more broad-based participation in the resistance, which translates into increased pressure being brought to bear on the target” (Chenoweth and Stephan 7). Generally speaking, this has been true of the situation of Iranian Bahá'ís. After some hundred and fifty years, the citizens of Iran have come to realize the innocence of the Bahá'ís and are beginning to support their call for freedom; and since the recent imprisonment of the seven leaders, Iranians both inside and outside the country have spoken out in support of the Bahá'ís in the media ("Swelling Chorus"). This change in attitude has ranged from Iranian citizens supporting local Bahá'í businesses to the country's most prominent lawyer and Nobel Peace Prize laureate, Shirin Ebadi, representing their case in Iranian courts (Basu 2).

Secondly, the study shows that “whereas governments easily justify violent counterattacks against armed insurgents, violence against nonviolent movements is more likely to backfire against the regime” (Chenoweth and Stephan 9). Internationally, the plight of the Iranian Bahá'ís has gained support from many countries, including the United States,

where several resolutions calling for the release of the prisoners have been introduced and passed in the House of Representatives and the Senate. Other major voices in support of the Bahá'ís include statements by the United Nations, the European Union, Amnesty International, and various international humanitarian organizations.

Since the ongoing persecutions date back to 1844, beginning with the Babi movement that led to the inception of the Bahá'í Faith in 1863, *A Tale of Resilience* briefly analyzes the historical importance of this resilient reaction within the region and in the context of world history. For example, the life and ultimate death of Fariba Kamalabadi's father is referred to in the film to show the generational continuity of the persecution. The film further explores the historical significance of the 170-year-old persecution and its political ramifications within Iranian society and the world at large. To exemplify this, Cornel West, a celebrated author and activist interviewed in this film, briefly talks about the similarity of his work to that of Martin Luther King, Jr., who also used nonviolent means to overcome oppression. Although their movements were political and somewhat different in approach, they shared certain core practices that are similar to the methods used by Bahá'ís in Iran. One such belief is that discourse, not violence, brings about constructive change.

*A Tale of Resilience* demonstrates how the simple yet profound concept of nonviolence has taken different shapes and tendencies in various parts of the world, by focusing on Iran in this documentary. The film investigates its main topic within the framework of various aspects of human behavior, philosophy, and world history.

### **INFLUENCES FROM THE LITERATURE ON THE PROJECT'S STYLE**

The formal and stylistic approaches featured in *A Tale of Resilience* draw on the work of Bill Nichols' *Introduction to Documentary*, David Bordwell's and Kristin Thompson's *Film Art: An Introduction*, Sheila Bernard's *Documentary Storytelling*, and *The American Cinematographer Manual* edited by Stephen Burum.

In Nichols' *Introduction*, various types of non-fiction films are divided into six different modes or categories. *A Tale of Resilience* is a hybrid of two modes, Expository and Participatory. Simply put, expository mode employs a voiceover as a method of explication, while the participatory mode depends mainly on interviews.

Nichols states that expository documentaries explore a subject by presenting a historical event or facts to “propose a perspective, advance an argument or recount history” (Nichols 26). Such films mainly use voiceovers or a narrator to address the audience directly. *A Tale of Resilience* proposes a perspective that is different from the state-endorsed narrative, which presents Bahá’ís as enemies of the state. Secondly, the documentary recounts history or events from the victims’ point of view in order, thirdly, to advance the argument that the group is not a threat to national interests. These three elements of the expository mode will be used to challenge popular beliefs, such as Bahá’ís being spies for Western countries, by illuminating the non-political activities of Bahá’ís throughout the region.

*A Tale of Resilience* further employs a mixture of participatory techniques, including the use of sound and voiceovers from the interviews over stock footage and B-roll footage. Nichols explains that the interview process is a “distinct form of social encounter,” distinct from ordinary conversation because it occurs in a specific structure guided by a specific protocol (19). In light of this description, the interviews can be seen to gather related statements from a range of interviewees who support the perspective of the film and those who do not, such as the spokesperson of the Iranian government on human rights. By finding and highlighting a common thread in their testimonies, the synergism of all the interviews is used to advance the goals of the project as described in the previous chapter. The film brings together two types of interviews: those with characters who give a personal account of the current situation along with other stories from their past, and those with experts who reveal historical facts and explain the topic from a broader, legal, and more neutral perspective. The two types of interviews are woven throughout the film to engage the ethos and pathos of the audience.

The *personal interviews* reveal each individual’s feelings about their family’s imprisonment, and function on a very human and emotional level. The cinematographer has captured them with close-ups on the two-dimensional screen to reflect their inner feelings in an intimate atmosphere.

The *expert interviews* also explore broader topics, such as persecution from a human rights perspective. These interviews focus on the discrimination Bahá’ís face in everyday life and relate that to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights charter. The film shows, for example, how a Bahá’í is denied police protection in the face of an attack on the grounds that

the Iranian government considers Bahá'ís to be a cult. These interviews include multiple specialists, from both the Bahá'í community and the Iranian government.

The technique used to film the interviews is also a prominent feature of the participatory mode. While the interviews in *A Tale of Resilience* are set up and lit traditionally to showcase the character on two-thirds of the screen, the film employs various other camera techniques to give scenes some movement. These procedures range anywhere from slow and steady pans and tilts to zooms and jump-cut shots. I limited the screen time dedicated to these setup interviews to avoid a preponderance of “talking heads.”

In the end, *A Tale of Resilience* benefits from the hybrid interview strategy because it affords the audience a more comprehensive understanding of the situation. Nichols explains that the root of the interview is the religious tradition of confession (87). Perhaps, given the subject matter, it is appropriate that I use this ancient “religious practice” in my own fight for the religious freedom of a religious group today.

The film's distinct style is reflected in its cinematography, music, and mise-en-scene. Bordwell's and Thompson's *Film Art* sheds light on the mise-en-scene component of the film, whereas Burum's *ASC Manual* centers on the vital aspect of cinematography; and Bernard's *Documentary Storytelling* discusses the music elements needed for a full cinematic experience. My approaches to both the production process and the cinematic style of *A Tale of Resilience* were influenced by these books.

Even though mise-en-scene is a dominant factor in narrative film, special attention is given to it in creating a documentary. In *Film Art: An Introduction*, Bordwell and Thompson describe the mise-en-scene as everything that appears before the camera. They explain that its elements can be divided into six different categories: composition, sets, props, actors, costumes, and lighting (23). With selective camera focus and scene-specific lighting and composition, the frame includes only the objects and props essential to the set, and excludes anything that may distract the attention of the audience from the characters of *A Tale of Resilience*. For example, in a scene in which the character (*actor*) explains the plight of his sister in prison, objects (*props*) may be necessary to create a connection between the person speaking and the individual he is talking about. Some item, such as a picture of Fariba displayed on a computer screen and viewed by his brother Iraj, is crucial in revealing the character's bond to Fariba, and both are shown within the same *composition*. In the same

scene, other objects, such as an unrelated book on the table or a character who has not been introduced but is sitting beside them, were not in full focus. Spot *lighting* was used to shift the focus of the viewer to a specific area of the set that reinforces the topic visually, for example where the brother is working on his computer against a darkish background somewhat out of focus.

Besides the overall mise-en-scene, specific elements within it, such as the cinematography, are essential for the creation of a visually pleasing film. There are many established cinematographic techniques in wide use among filmmakers. In the *American Cinematographer Manual*, Burum explains that cinematography is not just a subcategory of photography, but rather “photography is but one craft that the cinematographer uses in addition to other physical, organizational, managerial, interpretive and image-manipulating techniques to affect one coherent process” (84). Hence, cinematography in the film was a key factor informing the way shots would be composed, how they looked and felt, and what emotion they should evoke. The opening scenes where the mother is sitting outside, isolated in thought, are an example of this.

Finally, music and sound played a major role in giving the film an upbeat, authentic, and convincing feel. The original score intertwined with sound design supports the action and character emotions and therefore drives the film from start to finish. In an interview, filmmaker Deborah Scranton explained the importance of sound, stating that she designed the sound of her films to make sure that anyone seeing them would also feel what it is like to be there (as cited in Bernard 68). *A Tale of Resilience* features a rich score highlighting and supporting all aspects of the film and inviting the audience to be there with the characters, beginning with the upbeat opening music.

The film is composed of two kinds of music. The foremost one is a conventional film score with touches of Middle Eastern sounds. It is a modern film score similar to that of *The Social Network* and *the Fog of War* in intensity. Though thematically different from *A Tale of Resilience*, both of the other films share a sense of intensity that was foreseen as a characteristic of my work. The second type of music incorporated in the film is a mix of classical and modern Iranian music for scenes where a live sound or traditional track work best. An example of this is the chanting of a prayer by Fariba Kamalabai in the opening scene.

## RELATED FILM THEORY

To understand what film theories best fit this project, I chose Sheila Curran Bernard's work from among other writings I considered, to provide the theory behind the various elements in the film. In her *Documentary Storytelling Creative Nonfiction on Screen*, Bernard elucidates several concepts that are essential in the final presentation of an influential film. These concepts include clearly stating the "protagonist's wants," providing a "worthy opponent" to the protagonist's desires, and establishing "tangible goals" throughout the film, culminating in a "satisfactory ending" (Bernard 18).

What a "protagonist's wants" must be achievable for the audience to care about the characters. The "want" can be either active or passive. If the characters are in an active mode, they work towards their goal, whereas in a passive mode, they are unable to do anything about their situation (Bernard 18). The best example of a passive documentary is *The Thin Blue Line*, wherein Randall Adams is in prison and cannot himself do anything about his predicament. The primary characters in *A Tale of Resilience* are also passive, as they cannot secure their release from the prison. The seven prisoners and the Bahá'í community in Iran have virtually no legal recourse. All the prisoners and their community can do is voice their opinion in a gentle and non-threatening manner and face the consequences that follow. On the other hand, just as the filmmaker acts as the investigator in *The Thin Blue Line*, so the prisoners' families outside of the country are actively seeking justice for the Iranian Bahá'ís.

As Bernard asserts, a "worthy opponent" to the protagonist is an important element of a powerful documentary. After the film lays out the protagonist's wants, it will go on to introduce what or who stands against them. In this case, it is the policies of the Islamic Republic and the governmental authorities that enforce them. The film becomes intriguing when the hostilities are not simply black-and-white and actually present worthy or reasonable objections from the opponent, for example when the president of Iran so clearly objects to the idea of Bahá'í faith being a religion. In this way, *A Tale of Resilience* explores the other side's perspective and main arguments to maintain fairness and objectivity. The voice of the opponent is not a simple list of objections that have already been heard, such as that Bahá'ís are spies, but rather an honest analysis that, in this case, more helpfully suggests that the government's own insecurity has led them to level such accusations. For example, in the UN session, president Mahmood Ahmadinejad is shown conspicuously diverting the

question regarding the treatment of Bahá'ís by raising an irrelevant issue, then leaving the room.

After the goals of the protagonists and antagonists are clarified, the next move is to show that a solution to the problem is both feasible and tangible. Bernard states that, in spite of the difficulties the protagonist faces in achieving his or her goals, “the goal should be possible to do or achieve, which means that it’s best if it’s both concrete and realistic” ( 21). In *A Tale of Resilience*, the “goal” of effecting the release of the prisoners is exactly that. Although we would hope that the film could play a role in ending 170 years of persecution, we nevertheless understand that such an aim is not achievable overnight. Thus, the objective of the documentary is to serve as an instrument of education and to stress the urgency of the seven leaders’ release from prison. Due to the media attention and to objections received from various governments, the Iranian courts have already reconsidered their death sentences and have given the leaders 20-year imprisonments instead. While this is far from ideal, it does suggest that the Iranian government can be influenced by international pressure.

Once the film establishes there may be a slim reed of hope for the protagonists despite the opposition’s actions, the final step is to end on a “fulfilling note.” Bernard concludes that a documentary must have a “satisfactory ending” that is both “unexpected and inevitable” (24). While it was inevitable for the film to present facts that highlight the ill treatment of the Bahá'í community, its fair treatment of the opponents and its concluding theme of resilience were perhaps unexpected. The film began and ended in a peaceful manner, without imposing a Bahá'í perspective on the situation or the audience. It did not argue for a change in the current Islamic regime, but rather a change in the laws that concern basic citizens’ rights. The film does not ridicule any government officials. Instead, it makes a case for their rights as equal citizens of the country, who are entitled to live in freedom with their fellow countrymen. The documentary philosophically assumes a non-violent, non-aggressive stance in the belief that this is a more potent rhetorical strategy for advancing its human rights position. Such a non-aggressive approach might be surprising to the audience, who may expect the Bahá'ís to scorn the regime as an act of retaliation. However the film itself did not follow the ways of the oppressor in its struggle to achieve freedom for the oppressed.

## FILMS THAT RELATE STYLISTICALLY

For inspiration for *A Tale of Resilience*, research has been done on different films to discover the strategies and styles the directors used during their filming. From a larger pool of films, four that eventually influenced *A Tale of Resilience* are *The Fog of War*, *What The Bleep Do We Know!?*, *Sans Soleil*, and *The Thin Blue Line*. These films relate to this documentary through similar cinematic styles and the cohesive manner in which they have combined diverse elements.

### The Fog of War (2003)

*The Fog of War* combines interviews with archival footage to present the audience an emotionally engaging yet shocking story. At the core of the film is a single character, a former government official, who shares his story. Similarly, but perhaps not to the same extent, the main character of *A Tale of Resilience*, Shahla Kamalabadi, moves the film forward by sharing her personal reflections. *The Fog of War* inspires also by portraying the narrative in an edgy and creative style. *A Tale of Resilience*, while focusing on the personal stories of family members of Fariba Kamalabadi, includes some of the stylistic elements of *The Fog of War* and presents the story at a similar pace. The film employs three elements from *The Fog of War*: the interview technique, interview style, and music.

In the noted film, each interviewee is either in a medium-shot or close-up while delivering his comments. This technique was utilized when interviewing the main characters, including the brother and mother of the prisoner. It's use was based on the theory that it would help the audience connect with the characters and give the viewer a feeling of being in the story. Furthermore, it made the characters and their narrative appear more real and authentic.

Another major element that drives *The Fog of War* and keeps it interesting is the music. *A Tale of Resilience* also includes unique music, both traditional music from Iran and composed background score. Since music would become a prominent part of this documentary, it was discussed and incorporated in the film during the pre-production process. An early discussion of it was necessary to ensure that it would be an integral part of the overall film and not simply an element added after the fact. In summary, *The Fog of War*

provided great examples for interview styles, technique, and music that I tried to incorporate in this film.

### **What the Bleep Do We Know!?! (2004)**

The film *What The Bleep Do We Know!?!* combines common documentary film styles, such as interviews and voiceovers, with a fictional story to realize the overall theme of the film. *A Tale of Resilience* aims to do the same, but uses true stories instead to enhance the overall film and give it a personal touch. While *Bleep* uses a fictional plot interspersed with true facts to deliver itself, it is more than just intercuts between fact and fiction: it uses fiction in a structured and timely manner to enhance, explain, and provide a “real life” example of the theories that the experts talk about in the interviews. Although fictional, the story in *What the Bleep Do We Know!?!* stands as an accurate portrayal of the experts’ concepts and ideas. It is not simply a mixture of fact and fiction that magically works well together, but a pre-thought and well-conceived story that relates exactly to the facts in that film. *A Tale of Resilience*, in the same way, incorporates an intercutting, in this case between experts discussion of Bahá’í teachings and the real life of just one practicing Bahá’á. For example, an expert says that Bahá’ís respond to hate with love, then proceeds to discuss what this means. During the discussion, the audience hears a story of how Fariba showed love to her persecutors and cellmates in prison. This is shown in the form of a story told by one of the family members.

### **Sans Soleil (1983)**

*Sans Soleil* (Sunless) is an experimental documentary. It explores two distinct cultures, Japanese and Guinean, through montages and in the backdrop of letters read by a narrator. The film makes use of close-ups and thematic editing to present its ideas and gives the audience a chance to get to know its characters. Similar to this film’s technique, *A Tale of Resilience* also uses thematically important close-ups within the story to help the audience get “under the skin” of its characters. The audience is then given a chance--by being shown a close-up of a prisoner’s calm face, the anguish in a brother’s eyes, the fear in a mother’s trembling hands--to bond with each character. Through these well-composed shots, the audience is given the ability to feel every emotion and ordeal portrayed within these close-

ups. Films have the advantage of being able to present several ideas within a single frame. The filmmaker has control over the mise-en-scene most of the time and can get as close to or as far from his subjects as needed. *A Tale of Resilience* employs a specific cinematographic style that shows or hides elements that help or hinder the film in moving forward with its intended purpose. Each shot was storyboarded so that all the necessary elements needed were present, and those that would distract from the characters are excluded.

The editing of *Sans Soleil* is another important element that keeps the documentary together and moving forward. The editing is thematic throughout the film, and shots are cut together to give the audience a specific feeling of place and space. One shot may be in Japan and the next in Africa, but they make sense based on the story and the theme of the narrative. *A Tale of Resilience* makes use of similar editing techniques and processes to make the film intriguing. To start with, each shot connects thematically with the others, no matter how different they are in time, space, or presenter. The film also takes advantage of editing styles such as L-Cuts and voice-overs between the interviewees and archival footage.

### **The Thin Blue Line (1988)**

*The Thin Blue Line* makes liberal use of reenactment, a technique more common at the time in television documentaries. The film is groundbreaking, not only for its inventive stylistic approach, but for its ability to report events from multiple perspectives. These two aspects, both borrowed from *Fog of War*, greatly influence this film's future as a socially useable product. In particular, *A Tale of Resilience* uses this film to help give its own audience the Bahá'í story from a different perspective. For many years, the Iranian government has used television, radio, newspaper, and other media to spread its propaganda to the people of Iran about the Bahá'ís' anti-Iranian "agenda." This one-sided perspective has distorted people's understanding of the Bahá'ís and their beliefs for a very long time. This film gives a more accurate and balanced look at the situation. It may, just like *The Thin Blue Line*, which helped in the release of a wrongly-convicted, change the fate of the Baha'i prisoners and the course of history itself.

*The Thin Blue Line* is a good example of reenactment, because it teaches the filmmaker just how to recreate it on the screen. It must be noted that while this film uses

reenactments to question truth and memory, *A Tale of Resilience* has used them to claim and showcase the truth.

*A Tale of Resilience* aims to utilize and unify different elements from each of the above-mentioned films. It does not necessarily follow one or another film, but rather uses different techniques from each one. *A Tale of Resilience* should be seen, then, as similar to each film, but in a different way, rather than an equal mix of them all.

### **FILMS THAT RELATE THEMATICALLY**

There are many films that deal with the topics and themes explored in *A Tale of Resilience*. However, three of them, *The Promise of World Peace*, *People Power*, and *Gandhi*, share distinct features.

#### **The Promise of World Peace (2006)**

*The Promise of World Peace*, directed by Cullen Hoback, is a documentary about the vision of the Bahá'í Faith and its concern with building a world based on peace and harmony. It chronicles the history and works of various Bahá'í communities throughout the world and explains their approaches to bringing peace in their individual and collective lives. The film does not touch in detail upon the persecution of Bahá'ís in Iran, but rather explores the faith's different teachings and dimensions adhered to by its followers on a daily basis. These teachings include various spiritual instructions and physical practices briefly explored in *A Tale of Resilience*. While *The Promise of World Peace* introduces concepts that are broad, aiming to educate the audience by giving them the general concepts of the Bahá'í Faith, *A Tale of Resilience* goes a step beyond it by opening a specific area of discussion: response to oppression. *Resilience* also explores the temporary disadvantages of the Bahá'í approach, such as being misrepresented to one's neighbors by the government, as well as the long-term advantages of earning the respect and acceptance of one's community by adhering to nonviolent practices.

#### **People Power (1989)**

*People Power*, by Ilan Ziv, is a film that feels more like an unedited video than a structured film. It is one of the few and first major works to introduce the concept and methods of nonviolent action as an alternative to violent resistance. In a traditional

documentary format, and at a length of 53 minutes, it covers three countries whose citizens have used similar methods to overcome their oppressive governments. Named after the most famous of those movements, the People Power Revolution in the Philippines, it also includes the Intifada of Palestine and the fall of the dictatorship in Chile. It interviews Gene Sharp, an expert in the field of nonviolent movements, throughout the film. *People Power* succeeds in weaving together the three countries by their common theme of struggle to gain independence or end dictatorship via nonviolent means. With only minor differences to the approach of these movements, *A Tale of Resilience* shows Bahá'ís using similar methods of nonviolent action to seek justice for their community. For example, when Fariba is denied education as a youth, she and a few other members of the Bahá'í community continue to educate themselves independently, ultimately creating their own underground institution known as the Bahá'í Institute for Higher Learning. In *A Tale of Resilience*, similar to *Power People*, experts explain how *resistance* in other countries and *resilience* in the case of Bahá'ís in Iran have been practiced and have succeeded over many years. Acts of courage--from citizens saying no to the dictator of Chile to the Bahá'ís saying no when asked by the government to deny their faith --are discussed in this film. But *A Tale of Resilience* goes further by explaining the reasoning behind their actions--whether it is refusing to deny their faith under extreme torture in the case of Fariba's father, or not giving into pressure by leaving their homeland as demonstrated by Fariba herself. In either case, their mission remains to continually seek justice for themselves and their fellow citizens of all backgrounds.

### **Gandhi (1982)**

The narrative film *Gandhi* directed by Richard Attenborough is by far one of the best works highlighting the life of Gandhi in conjunction with the inception, development and success of a movement that Gandhi called Ahimsa, or “nonviolent.” The film attempts to cover some important events of Gandhi's life, including his humble beginnings as a lawyer and activist in South Africa and his return to India to free his people from British rule. It also highlights some personal, yet very key, events that led to the creation of Gandhi as a historical figure whose ideas will come to change India and spread throughout the world.

Although *Gandhi* is a narrative film rather than a documentary, its method of exploring themes through its characters and plot is similar to and influential for this documentary. *A Tale of Resilience* shares with this film the exploration of the human rights theme via the characters, and not the scope of the production or the genre. The main idea of *Gandhi*, which the historical Gandhi himself explored, was the concept of achieving one's goals by acts of nonviolence and peace. This idea is the pivotal concept of my film too.

Both films explore how one individual or a group of people can use a certain combination of universal teachings to withstand the onslaught of oppression. In *Gandhi*, a group of Indians, including Mohandas Karamchand (Gandhi) refuses to be violent when the police in South Africa are beating them down. In *A Tale of Resilience*, a group of government authorities torture Fariba's father in prison, but the family refuses to become violent or to seek revenge. *Gandhi* explores the concept of standing up for one's beliefs and rights as a human being and demands them through passive processes. In one scene in South Africa, Gandhi is walking on a street and is confronted by a White person, who demands that he get off the street. Based on the laws of the time, a non-White person would have to step down if faced by a White person in the pathway. In that situation, Gandhi stands his grounds and does not back down in the face of what he sees as an unjust law. In *A Tale of Resilience*, Fariba is taken to prison and ultimately given a prison sentence because she and other like her continue to educate their deprived community.

On the whole, all three source films carry a common theme or concept that ultimately served as the basic thematic pillar of *A Tale of Resilience*.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Many cinematic elements from various films play an influential role in the overall aesthetic presentation of the documentary.

The film best fits within two of Nichol's categories. It combines the elements of expository and participatory documentary with the aim of delivering a captivating film utilizing interviews, voice-overs, and music. *A Tale of Resilience* employs these cinematic tools to deliver a captivating documentary that convey its ideas.

The film opens with close-ups of the mother of the prisoner with a superimposed text giving a brief history of the persecutions. This initial technique aims to connect the audience with the mother by means of sympathy and a sheer sense of justice, around a subject that viewers may not be aware of or necessarily care for. Once this is established, the next scenes contribute a historical narration of the main character, Fariba, by means of personal stories told by her mother. At the same time, details of the prisoner's situation such as arrest dates and charges are provided through an interview with her brother. A more general sense of the situation is communicated to the audience through news clips, which provide further information regarding the historical and current struggle of this minority group in Iran.

### INTERVIEWEES

The interviews are a primary tool used to convey the story, and center on three groups of people: the family of the prisoner, who help us discover Fariba's story and her struggle; the experts, who explain the philosophy behind the prisoners' actions; and the opponents, who offer the audience their reasoning and thoughts on the issue. The family members and experts appearing in the interviews are cast based on their personal and professional relationship to the subject.

The qualifications of the family members were being (1) close (or formerly close) to Fariba, (2) deeply concerned about her well being in prison, and (3) active in pursuing her rights through various governmental and human rights groups. Simply stated, these

characters are not just any family members--they are both very close to and very concerned for Fariba.

The second group of interviewees, the experts, are individuals who are considered the “voice-of-authority” inside and outside the Bahá’í community. They include Cornel West, the well-known author and activist; Roxana Saberi, a cell-mate of Fariba and journalist-turned-activist; Diana Alai, the Bahá’í representative in the United Nations, and a few others individuals. They are recognized personalities who have both the academic and religion-affiliated qualifications to appear and make statements.

For the third group, the opponents, effort was made to cast people who deeply feel that what the government is doing to the Bahá’ís is just. It was believed that the more extreme, concrete, and “worthy” the opponent is, the more balanced and strong the film would be. Following Bernard’s criterion of a “worthy opponent,” the two interviews from this group include the president of Iran and the representative of Iran’s Human Rights Council.

## **TECHNIQUES AND AESTHETICS**

*A Tale of Resilience* is shot mostly in high-definition video with some archival parts of the film being standard-definition and Web-based video. The documentary’s low-resolution video footage is taken from uploaded content online. Such footage results in the appearance of pixels when projected on big screens. The rest of the footage is filmed with pre-planning and exhibits stable camera movement with pans and tilts throughout the film.

Sound is also an important factor in the process of making this film. The sound of *A Tale of Resilience* is a combination of natural and diegetic sounds from the scenes themselves, mixed with non-diegetic music that enhances the story, characters, and (serious) mood. Sound and music have been thoroughly explored in Chapter 2.

The lighting and set design is expressionistic. For example, a Persian tea-maker is visible right behind the mother in the interview. The brownish couch and the white head cover also incorporate Iranian design elements. A warm filter was added when the families are discussing personal stories or recalling heavy emotional events. On the other hand, cooler and natural colors are used for the rest of each scenes. Black-and-white footage and images used throughout the film are kept as-is, without any color augmentation.

Overall, the film is a work of art itself, as it employs various filmmaking methods and procedures to communicate its message. *A Tale of Resilience* strives to balance message and presentation.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **ASSESSMENT OF GOALS AND OBJECTIVES**

While writing the thesis that would eventually form the backbone of the film and its production, I came upon many ideas masquerading as viable steps that proved to be otherwise once production started. During the development stage and the thesis process, one criterion I thought would be easy to meet was producing the film without any external influences. However, since the film was to be based on the life of someone else, and since people other than myself would have to take part in the process, many challenges were inevitable.

#### **THE FINANCIAL CHALLENGE**

Having created a film package, which included a detailed synopsis, budget, schedule, and the other necessary elements of a fully-detailed and comprehensive proposal (see Appendix), I began to approach several individual donors. My assumption was that, since the film was based on a very important topic, it would be funded very easily by the people I had in mind. However once I began the process, I realized there is a huge gap between “people’s mouths and pockets,” as one collaborator pointed out. It came to me as a surprise that the initial people I had in mind found various excuses not to fund the project, ranging from the unstable state of the US economy to the upcoming plumbing expenses in a newly remodeled home.

I quickly learned that things are not as they seem to be. Though excuses were made by the people I had initially contacted, the response of those who learned about the project as I was working on it was quite different.

While I was in the process of production, their question of “What are you working on nowadays?” attracted a number of unexpected supporters who wanted to help the project with both money and in-kind services. It became obvious that, once an object is in motion, it attracts the right people and situations needed to move it forward. So though the initial backers backed down, other resources arose in the process of development that helped carry

the project to completion. In the end, I did not use any donor's contributions towards the project, as the scale of production I had had in mind was much larger than the scale in which the film was ultimately produced. The project was fully financed by myself with the help of in-kind contributions from the crew. The attached Budget created during the pre-production is only an estimation of costs had I produced the film in the envisioned scale.

### **SUMMARY OF LESSONS LEARNED AND THEIR OBJECTIVES**

Making a film about an on-going situation is not as easy as one thinks. When I began development, my subjects had been in prison for almost two years and the family very concerned and doing everything possible to get them out. On the one hand, the very reason the documentary was being made was to call for their release; on the other hand, had they been released, the whole film would have to be changed to tell is as a post-event story. Since their release was my ultimate goal and the aim of the documentary itself, the joy of the news would have overshadowed the irrelevancy of my film and even the fact that there would be no film at all.

That aside, working on an ongoing situation had drawbacks for construction. At any moment during the editing process, my goal was to finish the editing of a scene and move on; but working on a current topic that involved dealing with new information all the time made process arduous. Thus, it was necessary to change gears and create an overall theme and storyline for the film that would not be easily affected by the changing situation.

As a result, I refocused the storyline from highlighting the persecutions of several Bahá'ís (in a list of events and dates) to telling one main character's story—Fariba's story. With this technique, I was able to build the character of Fariba Kamalabadi from childhood to the day she was arrested. I weaved together stories from her mother and brother to produce a certain feeling about her personality instead of the current situation. This process naturally led to seeing her as a person and giving the audience a specific face to connect to.

While building a character and telling a good story about Fariba Kamalabadi, I had to remember to tell the audience why we need to learn about her. This led to the integration of some basic facts and news clips about the arrest of the seven Yaran members within the sequence of Fariba's life story.

## **REENACTMENT PLANS**

It eventually seemed easier and wiser to reenact scenes instead of trying to shoot on location in Iran. But after a few weeks into production, even the reenactments seemed unnecessary, as we were able to acquire footage from Iran. The plan for this process was as follows:

The reenactments within the film would be limited in both the amount of time they took on screen and what they would showcase. They would be shorter than two minutes in length, dramatizing only the stories that family members and a narrator would be telling. The purpose of the reenactments was to provide, in staged settings a sense of atmosphere to the audience, not to make them think they are watching reality. The rationale of the reenactments was mostly to add a visual counterpart to the voices of the families and experts, but to stand alone in other cases.

## **CONCLUSIONS FROM PROJECT**

It was not possible to remain unaffected by the emotional weight of the subject matter. As I learned more and more about Fariba and her family (who now reside in the US), I began to connect with them in many ways and at deeper levels. The characters and their stories, which I played over and over in the editing sequence, became real--and ultimately a reality that I had to deal with on a more day-to-day basis.

The friendship I built with Iraj, Fariba's brother, allowed us to speak clearly to one another on many issues and thus to allow me an insider's perspective on the situation. Not everything that was discussed during the many months of production, whether it was on camera or off, could possibly be included in the film; however, it did shape the overall feeling of the final product. My connection with the family made the film more than a subject to be explored, but rather a story that needed to be told, a story that had become as personal to me and as timely as it felt to the rest of the family. On the other hand, the personal connection never hindered my judgment of what makes a creditable story. The film does not intentionally include lies, nor does it try to color its treatment of the issue. The dishonest statements, charges, actions, and behaviors of the Iranian government are the exact reasons Fariba, and many more, are currently in prison; it would not be beneficial to use the tactics of the oppressor for the freedom of the oppressed.

In conclusion, the unique struggle of the Iranian Baha'i community and the results of their century-long resilience can be summed in this quote by Gandhi "*First they ignore you, then they laugh at you, then they fight you, then you win.*"

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*Gandhi*. Dir. Richard Attenborough. By John Briley. Perf. Ben Kingsley. 1982. Columbia Pictures, 2001. DVD.

*People Power*. Dir. Ilan Ziv. Icarus Films, 1989. DVD.

*The Promise of World Peace*. Dir. Cullen Hoback. Westlake Entertainment, 2007. DVD.

*San Soeil (Sunless)*. Dir. Chris Marker. Prod. Anatole Dauman. Perf. Florence Delay, Arielle Dombasle, and Riyoko Ikeda. 1983. Argos Film, 2007. DVD.

*The Thin Blue Line*. Dir. Earl Morris. Perf. Randall Adams. 1988. Miramax Films, 1998. DVD.

*What the Bleep Do We Know!?* Dir. Mark Vicente and Betsy Chasse. Perf. Marlee Matlin and Elaine Hendrix. 2004. 20th Century Fox, 2006. DVD.

**APPENDIX**  
**BUDGET AND TIMELINE**



<b>Supplies and Materials</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Unit</b>	<b>Cost</b>	<b>Total</b>
Production Supplies				1500
Office Supplies				1500
Editing Supplies				2000
HD Tape Stock/ SD Cards	20	Cards	35	700
VHS reference Tapes	0	Rolls		0
<b>SUBTOTAL</b>				<b>5700</b>

<b>Services General</b>	<b>Quantity</b>	<b>Unit</b>	<b>Cost</b>	<b>Total</b>
Office Rent	12	Months	400	4800
Shipping	12	Months	300	3600
Telephone	12	Months	250	3000
Transfer to Beta-sp (for festivals)	2	Hours	130	260
Beta-sp tapes	50		25	1250
HD Camera Rental	29	Days	655	18995
Sound Rental	29	Days	300	8700
Lights and Misc. Rentals	29	Days	175	5075
Aerials	0	Days	4000	0
Photo Duplication				1500
Edit Tables and Room Rental	24	Weeks	400	9600
<b>SUBTOTAL</b>				<b>56780</b>

<b>Finishing</b>				
Sound Transfers				1000
Sound Effects				2500
Music and Effects Editor	2	Weeks	1725	3450
Music and Effects P&W	2	Weeks	262	524
On-line Edit				23000
Sound Studio	10	Hours	125	1250
Sound Mix	20	Hours	375	7500
Masters and Protection				2400
<b>SUBTOTAL</b>				<b>41624</b>

<b>Other Costs</b>				
Stills Rights	300	Photos Minute	20	4000
Stock Footage	50	s	1000	40000
Music Rights				11500

Original Music Recording	10000
Insurance	8205
<b>SUBTOTAL</b>	<b>85705</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$46,864.00</b>

### PROPOSED TIMELINE

	<b>Date</b>	<b>Activities</b>
<b>Pre-Production</b>	July '11 - Oct '11	
	July August September October	Begin Fundraising Begin preproduction & continue fundraising Find and Finalize Crew Gather stock footage & schedule shoot days
<b>Production</b>	November '11- January '12	
	November  December	Shoot interviews with families, B-roll  Additional B-roll & pick-ups
<b>Post-Production</b>	January '12 - May '12	
	January February March April May	Assembling footage & begin editing Finish a First Cut Deliver a Rough cut - begin sound Final cut - begin writing Chapter 4 Finalize film, finish chapter 4, submit