

The Bahá'í Faith in the Arabic Speaking Middle East

Part 1 (1753-1863)

by Ramsey Zeine

Introduction

The population of Arab¹ countries extending from the Gulf States to the Atlantic Ocean is about 280 million people². The few among them who have heard about the Bahá'í Faith tend to have a distorted view characterized by misconceptions³. In the current environment of acrimonious accelerated change, growing open-mindedness, interest in knowing about “the other”, and as human-rights take on a more meaningful application, opportunities will eventually enable Bahá'ís to publicly present a true picture of the history and teachings of the Faith⁴.

Upon learning about the existence of the Bahá'í Faith, religious communities around the world normally express an interest related to specific issues. They want to know something about its history and teachings. Understandably, they also tend to question the relationship between selected verses in their own scriptures, such as those related to finality of revelation and prophecy, with the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

In the predominantly Persian Moslem Shí'ah environment, these issues have been addressed by the Bahá'í community which gradually came into being about 150 years ago in Iran. As a result of the ongoing dialogue between Bahá'ís and their Shí'ah compatriots a considerable body of Bahá'í literature developed addressing certain verses in the Holy Qur'án and Shí'ah traditions. Over the years a growing segment of the Iranian population heard about the Faith from authorities and clergy, albeit in a heavily distorted manner, often as a result of widely publicized waves of persecution. As a result, one of the major challenges facing Persian Bahá'ís is to simultaneously correct widely spread misconceptions and to present a comprehensive true picture of the teachings and history of the Bahá'í Faith.

In the predominantly Arab Moslem Sunni environment, the same challenges related to certain verses of the Qur'án and tradition exist, but in some instances they need to be addressed from a Sunni perspective. A body of Bahá'í literature in Arabic developed over

the years for this purpose⁵. However in Arab lands additional challenges may well face those who would set out to provide a true picture of the Cause and to correct misconceptions. One of these challenges could be an incorrect perception of the identity of the Faith.

Occasionally, during dialogue, Moslems of Arab culture question the origin of the Bahá'í Faith. It is understandable that Moslems in general, especially those of Arabic culture, have a great love for the Arabic Language, the fact that the Qur'án is in Arabic and that the Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) was an Arab⁶. With its origins in the Bábí religion in Persia, the Bahá'í Faith may be misconstrued from an Arab perspective as being a 'foreign Persian' religion. This would constitute for some a divide between the Arabs and the Bahá'í Faith. It is therefore a formidable challenge to be addressed.

In an effort to address this possible misconception and generate an environment where constructive dialogue prevails, this paper proposes presenting the history of the Faith with the intent of identifying commonalities that are of interest to Arabs. The premise of this paper suggests that by highlighting certain historical facts, the Faith will be seen in a light which is neither foreign nor distant from that which is of value to people of Arabic culture.

The focus of this paper on matters of interest to people of Arab culture may create an impression of bias towards giving the Bahá'í Faith some level of Arab identity. To avoid this impression, it is important to keep in mind the points mentioned below concerning the supra-national identity of world religions, as well as the contributions of peoples amongst whom they first appeared.

1. Bahá'u'lláh identifies the Faith He heralds as “. . . *the changeless Faith of God, eternal in the past, eternal in the future.*” (GWB 136) Sacred texts of other religions also affirm the changeless eternal aspect of the Cause of God.⁷ Therefore identities of origin, whenever mentioned, should be seen simply as pointers to a launching stage in the unfolding destiny of the “*changeless Faith of God*”. In its essence, religion transcends the identity of geography, nationality and people. The fact that God reveals the various stages of His *Changeless Faith* through chosen Individuals, at certain times, in certain geographical locations, amongst certain people, does not imply that a religion belongs to – is owned by – those people and is limited to its geographical location. Thus for example, Islam, born in Arabia, is not an Arab religion; It is universal.

2. During His lifetime and multiple exiles, Bahá'u'lláh dwelt amongst Persians, Arabs, Kurds and Turks, and interacted with peoples of Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian and Moslem religions. A comprehensive balanced history of the Faith would need to highlight matters of importance related to the interactions of Bahá'u'lláh with these ethnic identities and religions.
3. In the same way that early Christian believers arose from the shores of Galilee, and early Moslem believers arose from the tribe of Quraysh, early Bahá'í believers arose from Iran. Common factors shared between such early believers include the fact that they had to simultaneously face the brunt of persecution while striving to spread their new Faiths. The sacrificial contribution of the Persian Bahá'ís is unequaled in Bahá'í history. The tribulations, often blood-drenched, they suffered have not abated since the inception of the Faith over a century and a half ago. Among the accolades of distinction born by the Persian Bahá'í community are the following:
 - With all due admiration and respect for pioneers from a number of countries, during the first Bahá'í century, the Bahá'ís of Iran were by far the ones who left their country in relatively considerable numbers to spread the Message of Bahá'u'lláh in many lands. As such, they have a most outstanding record of pioneering around the world.
 - They continue to be the most developed Bahá'í community despite the continuous challenges they face.⁸

Nevertheless, neither the Persian Bahá'ís, nor their fellow believers, nor in fact any serious student of religion can, in the light of the teachings of the Faith and Its world-wide spread, consider It as either belonging to Iran, or of being a Persian religion. Similarly, facts of interest to Arabs, or to any of the several other cultures within which the Faith grew, are not in any way intended to give any identity to *the changeless Faith of God*. Rather, such facts, as they gradually come to light through research, serve to reinforce the concept that from the very beginning, the Bahá'í Faith had a broad multi-national, multi-cultural foundation.

With this understanding, we return to the focus of this paper which touches briefly on a few occurrences within a limited early period of history (1753-1863), and which are of interest to people of Arab culture. More research is needed across a longer period⁹ to uncover important milestones of the Cause in the Arabic speaking Middle East. Consequently, this paper puts out an appeal to scholars who understand the needs of this critical time of upheaval and

change, and who are far more professionally qualified than the author, to arise and shoulder the responsibility of uncovering milestones of bonding value between Arabs and the Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh.

Subjects of interest to Arabs are outlined under the following main headings: Matters of Identity; Early Arab believers; Bahá'u'lláh - Milestones in Arab Lands, and Surat Al-A'ráb,¹⁰ a Tablet revealed by Bahá'u'lláh in the prison of 'Akká, addressed to Arab believers in Baghdad and its surroundings. It is with sincere appreciation that I offer my gratitude to a distinguished Persian Bahá'í friend, who pointed out the importance of researching matters relating the Bahá'í Faith to peoples of Arab culture, and inspired this humble research effort.

Matters of Identity

Shaykh Ahmad-i-Ahsá'í

Shaykh Ahmad-i-Ahsá'í (1753-1831) is identified in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas as the one "...who was the founder of the Shaykhi School and the first of the 'twin luminaries that heralded the advent of the Faith of the Báb.'" (KA Note 171, p. 239)

Shoghi Effendi¹¹, quoting A.L.M. Nicolas, lists the genealogy of Shaykh Ahmad-i-Ahsá'í. It consists of a series of Arab names.

His genealogy, according to his son Shaykh Abdu'lláh, is the following: "Shaykh Ahmad-ibn-i-Zaynu'd-Din-ibn-i-Ibrahim-ibn-i-Sakhr-ibn-i-Ibrahim-ibn-i-Zahir-ibn-i-Ramadan-ibn-i-Rashid-ibn-i-Dahim-ibn-i-Shimrukh-ibn-i-Sulih." (Essai sur le Shaykhisme, p. 1)

In another note from the same source, we have the birthplace of Shaykh Ahmad, as well as the origin of his religious persuasion. "Born Rajab, 1166 A.H., 24th of April-24th of May, 1753, in (the) town of Ahsa in district of Ahsa, northeast of Arabian peninsula." (*Essai sur le Shaykhisme* 1) "Born a Shi'ah, though his ancestors were Sunnis." (Ibid., 2)

Hand of the Cause of God Ḥasan Balyuzi, identifies the Arab tribe of Sheikh Ahmad.

Shaykh Ahmad-i-Ahsá'í . . . the founder of the Shaykhi school, belonged to the ancient tribe of Banu-Sakhr, and his family originated from the region of Ahsa on the Arabian mainland. His father's name was Shaykh Zayni'd-Din, and Bahrayn had been their home.¹²

In other words, Shaykh Ahmad-i-Ahsá'í, the first individual to herald the dawn of the new Revelation, was an Arab from the ancient Arab tribe of Banu-Sakhr, as can be further observe from his name, Ahsá'í. He arose from Al-Ahsa' Northeast of the Arabian Peninsula, an Arab territory within the Ottoman Empire, and proceeded to commence his mission in another Arab part of the Empire, Najaf and Karbala¹³ in Iraq.

The Báb

Historic identity by descent

The Báb was born in Shiraz and therefore had a Persian identity by birth. However, Mr. Balyuzi informs us of His historic identity.

Siyyid (or Mírzá) 'Alí-Muḥammad, known to history as the Báb, was the son of Siyyid (or Mir) Muḥammad-Rida, a mercer of Shiraz. He was born on October 20th 1819 (Muharram 1st, 1235 A.H.). Through both His father and His mother He was descended from Imam Ḥusayn the third Imam.¹⁴ Thus He stood in direct line of descent from the Prophet Muḥammad.¹⁵

“This Arabian Youth”

The Báb mentions His historic identity in His Writings by referring to Himself on occasion as “*This Arabian Youth*”. For example:

O peoples of the earth! Give ear unto God's holy Voice proclaimed by this Arabian Youth Whom the Almighty hath graciously chosen for His Own Self. He is indeed none other than the True One, Whom God hath entrusted with this Mission from the midst of the Burning Bush.
(SWB 50)

It should be noted that the Báb also referred to Himself as Persian Youth. In an epistle sent to Muḥammad Shah from Bushihr, the Báb wrote (provisional translation) “Know thou O King that I am a Persian Youth (Fata A'jamii) from the merchant class...”¹⁶

First Action – Pilgrimage to Mecca

The first formal action the Báb undertook after declaring His mission and receiving a letter from Mullá Ḥusayn, was a pilgrimage to Mecca¹⁷. There, in the heartland of both Islam and the Arab world, He, in an Epistle conveyed by Quddus, called upon the Sherif of Mecca to embrace the truth of the new Revelation.

Writings in Arabic

The first Tablet revealed by the Báb on the eve of His declaration to Mullá Ḥusayn, the Súrih of Muluk, was in Arabic. It is the first chapter of "the Qayyum-i-Asma', His celebrated commentary on the Surih of Joseph, revealed in the first year of His Mission, and characterized by Bahá'u'lláh as 'the first, the greatest, and mightiest of all books' in the Bábí Dispensation ..." (PDC 27) A considerable volume of the Writings of the Báb is in Arabic, including another major work known as the "Arabic Bayán".

In brief, the Báb, a Manifestation of God and forerunner of Bahá'u'lláh, was of Persian origin by birth and of Arab historic origin by descent from the House of the Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon Him. His revealed Word was both in the Persian and Arabic languages, and He, in some Tablets, referred to Himself as "*This Arabian Youth*". The first mission He undertook was to Mecca, the heartland of Islam and the Arab world.

Early Arab Believers

Fruits of the Steadfastness of Mullá Alí Bastámí

After the Báb declared His Revelation to the Letters of the Living, and instructed Mullá Ḥusayn to proceed on a mission which eventually brought him into indirect contact with Bahá'u'lláh, Nabil, in his "The Dawn-Breakers", informs us that:

The Báb then summoned to His presence Mullá Alíy-i-Bastámí, and addressed to him words of cheer and loving-kindness. He instructed him to proceed directly to Najaf and Karbila, alluded to the severe trials and afflictions that would befall him, and enjoined him to be steadfast till the end. "Your faith," He told him, "must be immovable as the rock, must weather every storm and survive every calamity. Suffer not the denunciations of the foolish and the calumnies of the clergy to afflict you, or to turn you from your purpose. For you are called to partake of the celestial banquet prepared for you in the immortal Realm. You are the first to leave the House of God, and to suffer for His sake. If you be slain in His path, remember that great will be your reward, and goodly the gift which will be bestowed upon you. (DB 85)

After a series of further developments, we read,

Mullá Alíy-i-Bastámí, though the first to fall a victim to the relentless hate of the enemy, underwent his persecution in Iraq, which lay beyond the confines of Persia. (DB 146)

Shaykh Muḥammad-i-Shibl

When Mullá Alíy-i-Bastámí was imprisoned in Baghdad, the governor appointed a number of clergy to study his case. One of them was an Arab named Shaykh Muḥammad Shibl. Hand of the Cause Mr. Ḥasan Balyuzi provides two outstanding facts, one relating Muḥammad Shibl to the Shaykhi movement through *Siyyid Kazim-i-Rashti* the successor of Shaykh Ahmad Ahsá'í. The other is about Muḥammad Shibl himself, embracing the Faith of Mullá 'Alíy-i-Bastámí, the investigated. Balyuzi wrote:

...Shaykh Muḥammad Shibl, was a distinguished follower of the Shaykhi leader, Siyyid Kazim-i-Rashti, and was indeed his personal representative in Baghdad . . . When Mullá 'Alíy-i-Bastámí, the Letter of the Living, was brought to Baghdad and imprisoned, Shaykh Muḥammad Shibl visited him in prison, learnt of the claim of the Báb and became a believer.¹⁸

A fourth generation descendent of Shaykh Muḥammad Shibl, Dr. Kamran Ekbal, provides this interesting insight which puts a time scale on the period of investigation.

Shaykh Muḥammad Shibl was among the group of Ulama who, in accordance with an order issued by Najeeb Pasha, the Vali of Baghdad, were present during the three month period of the trial of Mullá 'Alíy-i-Bastámí.¹⁹

Shaykh Muḥammad Shibl was therefore either the first, or amongst the first, Arabs to believe in the Báb. He served the Faith with devotion and fortitude. Dr. Ekbal provides a comment of historic importance to women's liberation, involving the cooperation of a Persian believer with an Arab believer. He writes

At the home of Shaykh Muḥammad Shibl in Baghdad, long before the conference of Badasht, Qurrat Al-'Ain used to appear without a veil and address her students. Some of the students complained to the Báb. The Báb, in one of His Tablets, gave her the title of Ṭahirih.²⁰

Mírzá Muḥammad Mustafa Baghdadi

Mírzá Muḥammad Mustafa Baghdadi was the son of *Shaykh Muḥammad Shibl*. Mr. Balyuzi provides us with a synopsis of his life:

...Mírzá Mustafa, who was born in Baghdad in about 1837. During the period that Bahá'u'lláh was in Baghdad, Mírzá Mustafa became devoted to Him, although, of course, Bahá'u'lláh had not put forward a claim at this

time. In 1874 Mírzá Mustafa was arrested along with many others of the Bahá'ís of Baghdad, and after this he travelled to 'Akká and sought permission from Bahá'u'lláh to live in the vicinity of that city. Bahá'u'lláh instructed him to take up his residence in Beirut where he was frequently of service to those Bahá'ís travelling to 'Akká. After the ascension of Bahá'u'lláh, he moved to Alexandretta (Iskandarun), where he died in 1910.²¹

The love of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá for Mírzá Muḥammad Mustafa Baghdadi, and the magnitude of his services to the Faith can be appreciated by the fact that, as Dr Ekbal explains, he “was the recipient of more than 150 Tablets revealed for him by Bahá'u'lláh, and 250 Tablets revealed by 'Abdu'l-Bahá.”²² Dr. Ekbal believes that “...Muḥammad Mustafa was probably the recipient of the highest number of Tablets, both from Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá.”

It is therefore no wonder that 'Abdu'l-Bahá immortalized Muḥammad Mustafa in His “Memorials of the Faithful”. (MF 130) He described him as being a “*Blazing Light...The hostile were afraid to attack him*”. He “*attended upon Bahá'u'lláh after His return from Kurdistan...he was the leader among the friends in Iraq.*”²³ He “*became a believer prior to the declaration of Bahá'u'lláh*”.

After the ascension of Bahá'u'lláh, 'Abdu'l-Bahá continues, Muḥammad Mustafa “*stood so firm against the waverers that they dared not draw a breath. He was like a shooting star...Not one of the violators so much as dared pass through the street where he lived...*” (MF 130)

Dr. Zia Baghdadi

Mr. Balyuzi mentions two of the descendants of Mohammad Mustafa:

Throughout his life Aqa Muḥammad-Mustafa served the Faith which he had embraced, with zeal and distinction. He spent many years in Beirut where he attended to the needs and requirements of pilgrims. His son, Aqa Ḥusayn Iqbal, did the same in subsequent years, with great devotion. Another son, Dr. Zia Baghdadi (Dr. Diya Baghdadi) resided in the United States, where his services were inestimable.²⁴

The Gold Trowel

During the course of laying the corner stone for the House of Worship in Wilmette,

Irene Holmes handed 'Abdu'l-Bahá a small, gold trowel which she had ordered for this very purpose, and He dug the earth to lay the corner-stone, having chosen for this a fragment of rock brought by Mrs. Nettie Tobin as her offering. Having done so, He invited the delegates of various American communities to do likewise. Following them, 'Abdu'l-Bahá asked a number of oriental Bahá'ís present to step forth and take part: Mihtar Ardishir Bahram Surush represented Bahá'ís of Zoroastrian background, Siyyid Asadu'lláh stood in for Bahá'ís of Muslim origin, Dr Zia (Diya) Bagdadi (Baghdadi) represented Arab Bahá'ís, and Ghodsieh (Qudsiyyih) Khanum-i-Ashraf the Bahá'í women of the Orient. Then the corner-stone was laid in place.²⁵

Sheikh Ja'afar Al-Tahhan

One of the most enduring services Sheikh Mohammad Mustafa Baghdadi rendered to present day Lebanon²⁶ was laying the foundation for the establishment of a Bahá'í community in the village of Mashghará, South of the Beka' valley, about 80 Km South East of Beirut. Mr. Sami Al-Tahhan, of the Bahá'ís of Mashghará, kindly provided the author with a hand-written note on which the following account is based:

Sometime in the late 1880's Sheikh Mohammad Mustafa Baghdadi taught the Faith to Sheikh Ja'afar Al-Tahhan in the town of Saida (Sidon), about 40 KM South of Beirut, probably giving him the distinction of being the first person to become a Bahá'í in what later became known as Lebanon. Sheikh Ja'afar, was born in 1843 to a prominent Shí'ah family. He came from Iraq in 1881 and settled in the predominantly Shí'ah village of Mashghará. His profound knowledge enabled him to become the Imam of Mashghará, a responsibility he carried for sometime after becoming a Bahá'í.

Through Mustafa Baghdadi, Sheikh Ja'afar attained the presence of Bahá'u'lláh and later attained the presence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá twice in Egypt.

The strong faith of Sheikh Ja'afar enabled him to withstand the considerable persecution of the villagers who, once his Faith became known, treated him with hostility. His steadfastness was passed on to his three boys who embraced the Faith and to the fourth boy who was a close friend of the Faith. The children of all four boys and their grandchildren embraced the Faith. When their

daughters married Shi'as, their husbands also embraced the faith. Thus a fully Lebanese Bahá'í community gradually came into being. Their Spiritual Assembly was formed in 1967. They have their own Bahá'í cemetery. The fortitude of this community in withstanding abuse and boycott is a shining example highly admired by all who know them.

Sheikh Ja'afar passed away in 1924 and was buried in the Moslem cemetery of the village. In the 1970's, his remains, with the approval of the Universal House of Justice, were moved to the Bahá'í cemetery of Mashghará.

These few sketchy glimpses, taken as a whole, weave an Arabian-Persian spiritual thread, arising from the desert of Arabia, flowering in Persia, mystically unfolding across more than a century of Bahá'í history, linking Shaykh Ahmad Ahsá'í, by the steadfastness of Mullá Alíy-i-Bastámí, through the descendants of Muḥammad Shibl to a golden trowel in the hand of Dr. Zia Baghdadi laying the foundation stone of the Mother Temple of the West at the feet of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. This thread shines with the brightness of emancipation as it touches on the impact of Ṭahirih addressing an audience without a veil in the home of Muḥammad Shibl. And finally, it also links Shaykh Ahmad to the formation of a Bahá'í community in Lebanon. Clearly far more remains to be uncovered that will acknowledge not only the contribution of early Arab believers to the growth of the Faith, but the fruits of the cooperation between Arab and Persian believers.

Bahá'u'lláh - Milestones In Arab Lands

Significant Dates

Bahá'u'lláh was born in Iran to a noble Persian family with long Persian ancestry²⁷. However, during the whole period of His Ministry, He was an exile and a prisoner in the Ottoman Empire. These are some significant dates:

1817-1892 75 years. Lifetime of Bahá'u'lláh

1853-1892²⁸ 39 years. The whole period of the Ministry on Bahá'u'lláh was outside Iran, in the Ottoman Empire (GPB 85)

1853-1863 10 years in Iraq, 8 of them among the predominantly Arabic speaking population of Baghdad²⁹, and two of them among the Kurds³⁰ in Sulaymányih

1863-1868 5 years in Istanbul-Adrianople

1868-1892 24 years among the predominantly Arab population of Palestine

Bahá'u'lláh spent the longest period of His Ministry in the Arabic speaking territories of the Ottoman Empire.

The Declaration of Bahá'u'lláh - Location, First Tablet and Its Language.

On a Wednesday afternoon, April 22, 1863, in Baghdad, an ancient city of Arabic culture and history, when "The muezzin had just raised the afternoon call to prayer, ... Bahá'u'lláh entered the Najibiyyih Garden, where He tarried twelve days before His final departure from the city." (GPB 148-52) "That historic day," Shoghi Effendi informs us, is "forever after designated as the first day of the Ridvan Festival." About the significance of this occasion he writes,

The arrival of Bahá'u'lláh in the Najibiyyih Garden, subsequently designated by His followers the Garden of Ridvan, signalizes the commencement of what has come to be recognized as the holiest and most significant of all Bahá'í festivals, the festival commemorating the Declaration of His Mission to His companions.

Furthermore Shoghi Effendi adds: "Of the exact circumstances attending that epoch-making Declaration we, alas, are but scantily informed." He goes on to inform us that, "The 'Suriy-i-Sabr' (Surih of Patience) (was) revealed on the first day of Ridvan." The Suriy-i-Sabr is in Arabic.

Bahá'u'lláh and the Arabic Language

The greater part of the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh is in the Arabic Language. The introduction to the Arabic edition of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas highlights certain implications related to choice of language (provisional translation):

The Kitáb-i-Aqdas was revealed completely in the Arabic language. The reader will not miss the implication of the choice of Bahá'u'lláh for Arabic to be the Language of the Obligatory Prayers, the language of the Mother Book of His Revelation, the language through which He set forth the foundations of the forthcoming world civilization, even though it was not the language of His people . . . Furthermore, He expressed a preference for the choice of Arabic as a world language to be spoken by all mankind.³¹

In the introduction to the English edition of the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, we are told that:

Bahá'u'lláh enjoyed a superb mastery of Arabic, and preferred to use it in those Tablets and other Writings where its precision of meaning was particularly appropriate to the exposition of basic principle. Beyond the choice of language itself, however, the style employed is of an exalted and emotive character, immensely compelling, particularly to those familiar with the great literary tradition out of which it arose. (KA intro, p. 10)

Bahá'u'lláh expressed His preference for the Arabic language by writing (provisional translation):

*That which is preferable to the Throne is that the entire world speaks the Arabic language because it is the greatest of all languages in its expansiveness. If the people were to inform themselves about the expanse of this language, they would undoubtedly select it. Although the Farsi language is very sweet, it does not have the expanse of the Arabic language. All languages in the world are limited in comparison with the Arabic Language. This is its distinction and the reason we have mentioned it.*³²

Bahá'u'lláh – “This Arabian Youth”

In several Tablets, Bahá'u'lláh refers to Himself as “. . . *this Arabian Youth*”. For example in a Tablet known as Súrih Al-Damm, addressed to “Muḥammad”³³, (this is a reference to the famous chronicler and poet³⁴, Nabil-i-Zarandi, author of the Dawn Breakers), Bahá'u'lláh writes, (provisional translation):

*Go to Ismulláh-Há, and inform him what the Spirit of God hath revealed unto thee ... Say O servant, We have revealed for thee Tablets and Epistles unknown to anyone except God. In them is that which will enable thee to be independent of all that was created in the realm of creation, and all that is in the heavens and the earth. But We did not send them to thee because We did not inhale from thee the fragrance of Those on High wafting from this Arabian Youth.*³⁵

A testimony of Bahá'u'lláh concerning Arabs in Baghdad

In a Tablet addressed to Hadrat Afnan Jinab-i- Aqa Mírzá Aqa³⁶ Bahá'u'lláh outlines several instances that highlight the level of affection, love and respect that the population of Baghdad, including prominent Sunni Arabs, had for Him before he left. He wrote that when He was in Baghdad, all people including the ‘ulamá, the ‘urfá (those with mystic knowledge), and others in Baghdad and

within its environs all the way to Basra, openly expressed the utmost humility and submission towards him.

Bahá'u'lláh said that one day Jinab-e-Siyyed Daoud³⁷, the mufti of Basra, attained the honor of coming into His presence with a group of others among them the famous Ibn-Alusi.³⁸ They sat outside until they received permission to come into His presence. The Mufti told those present that the reputation of Hadrat-e-Ishan³⁹ (a respectful reference to Bahá'u'lláh) has spread far and wide in those regions “*To the extent,*” The mufti said, “*that I do not think They⁴⁰ are aware how far it has gone*”.

Bahá'u'lláh wrote that the Cause had reached such a station (of respect and prominence) that whenever He would leave the house, Arabs who saw Him would utter words (of praise) that surpassed their description of their own leaders.

After enumerating several such instances, Bahá'u'lláh continues His account by referring to the highly emotional time of His departure when “*crowds upon crowds of people came from the city, including the 'Ulama and others. All said they were confident that He would always remain with them . . . but now suddenly He was leaving . . . The Arabs, like the clouds of Spring, were crying and lamenting*”. (GPB 34)

Bahá'u'lláh further describes, in His Tablet to the Afnán, the relationship He had with all types of people.

During the period of my stay in Iraq, the Ulama, the Urafa and the common people of all religious denominations would come to us and We would answer whatever question they asked.

Surat Al-A'ráb⁴¹ – A Tablet from Bahá'u'lláh to the Arabs

In this momentous Tablet, Surat Al-A'ráb, addressed by Bahá'u'lláh to the Arabs, He identifies those He is addressing by certain criteria, calls upon them to adhere to specific injunctions, guides them to thank God for certain reasons, exhorts them to steadfastness as He warns them about severe tests, explains why God chose them for Himself, informs them why they should “take pride upon all the peoples of the Earth”, and admonishes them to acquire a number of divine attributes. Towards the end He warns them of dangers facing them, and describes His sufferings. Several times throughout the Tablet, which is about 6 pages in the Arabic script, He addresses them in such in words as, “O My Arabs!”, “O friends of God from the Arabs”, “O Pen of the Ancient, remind Our friends from the Arabs, whom God has chosen for Thyself...”.

Significantly, Bahá' u' lláh follows every major statement He makes with an explanation of its purpose and/or provides the reasons for which He made it. It is also to be noted that the expressions of loftiness and praise Bahá' u' lláh lavishes on the Arabs in a sequence of phrases (here broken up into separate paragraphs), are then tempered by conditions they need to fulfill and by his expectation of them to acquire specific spiritual attributes. The following provisionally translated passages constitute the first two and a half pages of the Tablet, followed by a summary of the remaining three pages. Subtitles and comments have been added, and the text has been arranged and occasionally itemized for emphasis.

Opening Words:

In the opening words of the Tablet, Bahá' u' lláh announces that it is addressed to the Arabs.

This is Súrih A'ráb (the Súrih of the Arabs) which hath been revealed from the Ancient Revealer.

Criteria defining the Arabs addressed by Bahá' u' lláh

The source of the Tablet is mentioned in the following verses which also makes it clear that Bahá' u' lláh is addressing Arabs who have fulfilled certain criteria.

These are the verses of God revealed in truth from the Heaven of Glory. He hath made them to be a proof from Himself for all the world, and in them He mentions those who

- *knew God in Himself and*
- *were not veiled by the barking of those who seek partnership with God*
- *who entered beneath the shade of his care and*
- *resided in proximity to His mercy.*
- *Those are them upon whom the Concurrence on High and the Angels of Nearness pray.*
- *They are the ones who, when the Sun of Eternity shone upon them another time, prostrated themselves before God the Almighty the Omnipotent.*

Calling the Arabs to Embrace His Cause:

Having identified the recipients of *Súrih A'ráb*, Bahá' u' lláh calls upon them to embrace His Cause in a series of injunctions starting

with Words such as: “*Listen to the call of God...make haste to the Tree of God... Seek ye shelter in Its shade... Turn ye unto It*” and “*nourish yourselves from Its fruits*”. He Wrote:

O friends of God from the Arabs

- *Listen to the call of God from this Tree that arose in truth, which every one of Its leaves declares upon all things, ‘Verily I am God, no God is there but Him the Most Holy, the Precious the Kind.’*
- *O people, make haste to the Tree of God*
- *Seek ye shelter in Its shade. By God, were ye to search the heavens and the earth ye wouldst not find safety except under the shade of this Tree that has arisen above mankind and from which wafts the gentle breeze that infuses life into every smoldering bone.*
- *Turn ye unto It and*
- *Nourish yourselves from Its fruits that your hearts may be purified from the signs of every notorious beguiler.*

Reasons for thanking God

Calling upon the Arabs to thank God, Bahá’u’lláh lists a number of reasons for doing so.

Thank ye God for

- *having protected you from the wilderness of self and passion,*
- *and saved you from the vain imaginings and blindness in the Day whence God brought the Kingdom of His might upon all who are in heavens and on earth,*
- *and made Himself known unto you*
- *and revealed to you His beauty*
- *and spoke with you visibly as witnessed*
- *and made you of His servants who have knowledge.*

A Warning and Call to Steadfastness

Bahá’u’lláh warns His Arab friends that a grave danger is already facing them, and exhorts them to be steadfast.

Be ye steadfast in this Cause because Satan hath appeared with his soldiers and orders you in every instance to deny God Who created you and made you of the victorious.

A Profound Pronouncement

Bahá' u'lláh then makes a profound pronouncement to the Arabs which has overtones reverberating throughout religious history. “God,” He says, has “*chosen you for Himself*”, and follows up immediately with reasons in support of this pronouncement.

Praise God for having chosen you for Himself, whereas

- *when the Ancient Sun set upon Its land, It rose from the horizon of Iraq – your land¹² – this is naught but of His Grace upon you with which nothing in the heavens or upon the Earth can compare*
- *and the Face of God was shining brightly amongst you without a veil*
- *reciting upon you the verses of God for many months and years*
- *and the Ancient Beauty walked amongst you with the reverence and dignity of God*
- *revealing Himself upon you yet another time*
- *thus fulfilling the grace of God upon you that ye may be of those who are thankful.*

Consequences of the Pronouncement

Emphasizing the significance of His pronouncement, Bahá' u'lláh then instructs the Arabs to *take pride upon all the tribes of the world* and explains why they should do so.

It behooveth you to take pride upon all the tribes of the world inasmuch as none other than you have attained what ye have attained, if ye be of them who have knowledge.

Spiritual attributes

If we were to stop perusing *Surat Al-A'ráb* at this point, we might misunderstand the essence of the message of Bahá' u'lláh to the Arabs. All that has come before can only be correctly understood in terms of the Arabs arising to scale the spiritual pinnacles to which Bahá' u'lláh has set before them. That is, He has clearly held out a glorious station for the Arabs, but they can only achieve it by fulfilling the following conditions:

Therefore it behooveth you to

- *acquire the manners of God*

- *that from your hearts holy fragrances will burst upon all beings*
- *and from you the signs of the All-merciful God will appear.*
- *As God has chosen you from amongst his people,*
- *make ye an effort that from you may appear that which hath not appeared from others, that your being chosen by God will be proved amongst the people of the world.*
- *Be ye as the stars amongst the people of the world that through you those who have been veiled from the knowledge of God, and are of the ignorant, may be guided.*
- *Be ye trustworthy to yourselves and to the people, and their money, verily this is an attribute beloved by God before the creation of Adam from water and clay.*
- *But if you are not the trustworthy ones on earth, you will not trust your own selves neither will the people trust you, thus hath God advised you in the tongue of His Manifestation as an injunction for you and for all his creation.*
- *Purify your hearts from envy and hatred, and yourselves from inequity and mundane desires*
- *Obey ye the commandments of God verily He hath not commanded His servants except that which is better for them than the treasures of heavens and earth*
- *Beware lest ye contend about anything created on earth with anyone. Leave it to its people that your souls may find peace and ye be entirely devoted to the face of your Lord the Almighty the Great.*

In the remainder of the Tablet Bahá'u'lláh repeatedly addresses His audience in such terms as, “*O People . . . O My Arabs*” emphasizing some of the points already mentioned. He reiterates themes covered in other Tablets such as God entrusts the world to kings and wants only the hearts of His loved ones. (TB 220) He calls upon His “*friends from the Arabs*”:

O people, imbue yourselves with the attributes of God and shun the attributes of those who enjoin partnership with Him. God commands you to be chaste and pure. Hold unto the religion of God and do not commit inequity and vice. Be ye of those from whose faces the light of God is revealed, and from whose actions the signs of God and His

Dignity appear. Thus it beseemeth you to behave, O people of Bahá, in these days of great tribulation. ...

Dwelling upon His sorrows, Bahá'u'lláh provides a graphic description of their effect upon His Body.

O my Arabs! If you were to behold Me you would not know Me. From repeated tribulations My Hair has waxed white from Its black essence. From the onrush of adversity the 'Alef'⁴³ of this Cause has appeared in the shape of 'Dal'⁴⁴, and this Radiant Rosy Face has yellowed.

In closing this Tablet, Bahá'u'lláh calls upon the Arabs not to forget Him and laments the tribulations brought upon Him by the animosity of His half brother.

Thus it can be seen in general that Bahá'u'lláh declared His mission and established *the holiest and most significant of all Bahá'í festivals* in Baghdad an Arab territory of the Ottoman Empire, that the first Tablet He revealed on the first day of that momentous occasion was in Arabic, that He spent most of His Ministry in Arabic speaking territories of the Ottoman Empire, that the largest body of His Writings was in Arabic.

People of Arabic culture need to be invited to reflect on the implications of the fact that “*the language through which He (Bahá'u'lláh) set forth the foundations of the forthcoming world civilization*”, was Arabic, and of His statement that “*If the people were to inform themselves about the expanse of this language, they would undoubtedly select it.*” Moreover Bahá'u'lláh's reference to Himself as *This Arabian Youth* could have several meanings, one of them would undoubtedly be His high respect and affinity with the Arab heritage.

All these facts combined with His own warm recollections of the times He spent with Arabs in Iraq, the tender praiseworthy tone with which He addressed them, and the expectations He has of them, are bound to enkindle an understanding of a deep spiritual connection, far more significant than cordial closeness, between Bahá'u'lláh and the Arabs.

Closing Remarks

This paper makes a preliminary attempt to correct a distorted view about an unfounded divide between the Bahá'í Faith and people of Arab heritage. By focusing on matters of identity, contributions of early Arab believers, milestones of interaction between Bahá'u'lláh with Arabs, and a Tablet to the Arabs, it seeks

to demonstrate not only the absence of any boundaries between the Faith and Arabs, but an intermingling of a considerable magnitude.

The need for further research covering the whole period of the Ministries of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá cannot be over emphasized. Its aim will be to uncover a comprehensive picture of interactions between the Faith and Arabs. Such a picture, will undoubtedly contribute towards mitigating their misgivings about the Faith, and will lay foundations for a greater respect and a sense of closeness towards the Founder and His Mission. However, in keeping with the concept of the *changeless faith of God* touched upon in the Introduction, such research needs to be seen in at least three levels.

At one level, Arabs with penetrating insight into the implication of these milestones, will realize that they have been called to a privileged destiny in shouldering the world-wide responsibilities of the Bahá'í Faith.

At a higher level, Arabs and Persians may wish to reflect on their common destiny in view of certain statements by Bahá'u'lláh, such as those in the following quotation from a Tablet addressed to Zaynu'l-Muqarribín, where He states:

*Convey greetings on behalf of God upon the faces of those Arabs and Persians who lived around His House, that they may rejoice in the glad tidings of the All-Merciful and be of those who are steadfast. Say, O friends, thank God for having enabled you to meet Him, and brought you nigh unto Himself, and informed you of that from which most of His servants remained veiled, and destined for you that which cannot be known by all of creation.*⁴⁵

As a footnote to the grand panorama of history, is there any mystical significance in the fact that the first Persian believer⁴⁶ to suffer for his Faith did so on Arab land, and the first Arab believer⁴⁷ to suffer for his Faith was martyred on Persian soil?

At the third and highest level, which is the essence of the true spirit of the Faith, every believer, no matter what privilege his culture may have received in the Bahá'í Writings, realizes that a prime objective in Bahá'í life is to unequivocally demonstrate the truth of the injunction of Bahá'u'lláh, "*Ye are all fruits of one tree, the leaves of one branch, the flowers of one garden.*"⁴⁸

NOTES

¹ The definition of the word "Arab" is not universally agreed upon. By and large the general connotation of the word "Arab" implies being

a Moslem. As such, some people from Arab countries who are not Moslems take issue when being identified as Arabs. However, In current political usage, accommodation has been made in the definition of “Arab” by focusing on language culture and history. Thus Lebanon, having a Christian President, and a considerable Christian population, is considered an Arab country. For the purpose of this paper, all references to the word “Arab” are intended primarily to refer to Arab Moslems.

- ² A Report by ESCWA entitled “Aging In The Arab Countries: Regional Variations, Policies And Programs” has the following citation: “At a regional level, the population rose from 76.5 million in 1950 to 284.4 million in 2000.” <http://www.escwa.org.lb/information/publications/sdd/docs/04-wg-1-2.pdf>
- ³ With very few exceptions, Bahá'í literature is not available in bookstores and libraries in Arab lands. Media presentations have been negatively biased. Over a period of 24 months, July 2003 to July 2005, the number of Arabic websites carrying misconceptions about the Bahá'í Faith grew tenfold, from about 700 to over 7000. That is more than 260 new sites a month. However, faint glimmerings of change have begun to appear in few media outlets.
- ⁴ On July 1, 2005, Dr. Nabil Mustafa of the Bahá'í community of England, was invited by Al-Arabíyya to give an interview which was published on their website.
- ⁵ A comprehensive scholarly work in English is Moojan Momen's *Islam and the Bahá'í Faith*, George Ronald, Oxford, 2000. Another good book, brief and to the point, is *Bahá'u'lláh, The Great Announcement of the Qur'án* by Muḥammad Mustafá, Translated by Rowshan Mustafá, BPT, Dhaka, Bangladesh (circa 1993).
- ⁶ A number of verses in the Qur'an emphasize the fact that it was revealed in Arabic, for example *Sura 12, Yusuf* v. 2. In *The Emergence of Arab Nationalism* N. Zeine wrote. “*Islam was revealed by an Arabian Prophet, in the Arabic language, in Arabia. We read in the Qur'án: 'A Messenger has now come to you from among yourselves ...' (sura 3, Al-'Imran, v 106). There is a tradition that the Prophet said one day: "I am an Arab, the Qur'án is in Arabic, and the language of the denizens of Paradise is Arabic".* (Caravan Books, Delmar, New York. Third Edition 1973. p 130, 132-133).
- ⁷ The Bible, Mat. 24:35 “*Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away.*” The Qur'an (Yusuf Ali) tr, Surah 3) “*The Religion before Alláh is Islam (submission to His will)*”
- ⁸ The nurturing Hand of 'Abdu'l-Bahá guided the Persian Bahá'ís towards “*the emergence of a culture ...unlike anything humanity had ever known*”. This new culture distinguished itself by, “*taking into its own hands the responsibility for deciding its collective affairs through consultative action,*” and expressed its “*spiritual energies*” in “*the practical affairs of day-to-day life,*” such as establishing “*Bahá'í schools ...*” and, “*clinics and other medical facilities ...*”, as well as “*a*

network of couriers reaching across the land”, effectively, “*the rudiments of a postal service*” ... (See *Century of Light* commissioned by the Universal House of Justice, The Bahá'í Publishing Trust, New Delhi, India, April 2001, pp 10-11). Despite continuous intermittent atrocities, the Persian Bahá'ís went on developing such basic indicators of community identity comprising social, organizational, and practical aspects, up to the present.

- ⁹ The period to be researched should at least cover the whole of the Ministries of Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Who had considerable interaction with a number of prominent Arabs in Ottoman territories, mainly Palestine, Beirut and Egypt.
- ¹⁰ Bahá'u'lláh, *Athar-i-Qalam-e-Aala*, vol 4, *Mo'assayieh Milli Matbouaat Amri*, p. 215-220
- ¹¹ Shoghi Effendi, *The Dawn-Breakers*, (Ocean) p. 2
- ¹² H.M. Balyuzi, *The Báb - The Herald of the Day of Days*, p. xv
- ¹³ “Bereft of all earthly possessions, and detached from all save God, he, in the early days of the thirteenth century of the Hegira, when forty years of age, arose to dedicate the remaining days of his life to the task he felt impelled to shoulder. He first proceeded to Najaf and Karbila,” Shoghi Effendi, *The Dawn-Breakers*, (Ocean) p. 2
- ¹⁴ Imam Ḥusayn was the son of Fatimih, the daughter of the Prophet, and 'Ali, His nephew.
- ¹⁵ Balyuzi, *The Báb*, p. 32
- ¹⁶ Quoted from the Tablet of the Báb to from 2 , unpublished.
- ¹⁷ Mullá Ḥusayn sent a letter to the Báb in which he reported on the mission He had sent him and referred to “Bahá'u'lláh's immediate response to the Divine Message.” The letter, “cheered and gladdened the Báb, and reinforced His confidence in the ultimate victory of His Cause. He felt assured that if now He were to fall suddenly a victim to the tyranny of His foes and depart from this world, the Cause which He had revealed would live; would, under the direction of Bahá'u'lláh, continue to develop and flourish, and would yield eventually its choicest fruit ... The letter of Mullá Ḥusayn decided the Báb to undertake His contemplated pilgrimage to Hijaz”. (Shoghi Effendi, *The Dawn-Breakers*, p. 128)
- ¹⁸ H. M. Balyuzi, *Eminent Bahá'ís in the Time of Bahá'u'lláh*, (Ocean) page 270
- ¹⁹ Transliterated from the Paper of Dr. Kamran Ekbal, “*Murouri Bar Alvah Hadrat Bahá'u'lláh Khitáb beh Muḥammad Mustafa Baghdadī*”, SAFINE-YE IRFAN...
- ²⁰ Email from "Dr. Kamran Ekbal" Kamran_Ekbal@web.de, 14 June 2005
- ²¹ Balyuzi, *Eminent Bahá'ís*, p. 270
- ²² Transliterated from the paper of Dr. Kamran Ekbal, SAFINE-YE IRFAN...

- ²³ The transformation and reformation of the Bábí community in Baghdad, by Bahá'u'lláh after His return from Sulaymáníyyih, is graphically described by Shoghi Effendi (GPB,127-150). That 'Abdu'l-Bahá should attribute to Muḥammad Mustafa Baghdadi the quality "leader among the friends in Iraq" is worth contemplating with respect to the contribution of an early Arab believer to the Faith.
- ²⁴ Balyuzi, *The Báb*, p. 232
- ²⁵ H.M. Balyuzi, *Abdu'l-Bahá - The Centre of the Covenant*, p. 417
- ²⁶ Lebanon, as we know it today, did not exist at that time. The whole area was part of the Ottoman Empire.
- ²⁷ "Mírzá Abu'l-Fadl asserts in his writings that the genealogy of Bahá'u'lláh can be traced back to the ancient Prophets of Persia as well as to its kings who ruled over the land prior to the Arab invasion." (Shoghi Effendi, *The Dawn-Breakers*, p 13)
- ²⁸ Shortly after the Divine intimations experienced by Bahá'u'lláh in the prison of Siyah Chal, He was released. One month later He set off to Iraq with some members of his family arriving in Baghdad on January 12, 1853. See GPB 107.
- ²⁹ While in Baghdad Bahá'u'lláh associated with peoples of four different language cultures and three different religions, i.e "Within a few years after Bahá'u'lláh's return from Sulaymaniyyih the situation had been completely reversed. The house of Sulayman-i-Ghannam, on which the official designation of the Bayt-i-Azam (the Most Great House) was later conferred, known, at that time, as the house of Mírzá Musa, the Bábí, an extremely modest residence, situated in the Karkh quarter, in the neighborhood of the western bank of the river, to which Bahá'u'lláh's family had moved prior to His return from Kurdistan, had now become the focal center of a great number of seekers, visitors and pilgrims, including Kurds, Persians, Arabs and Turks, and derived from the Muslim, the Jewish and Christian Faiths." (GPB 129)
- ³⁰ The Kurds have their own Kurdish language and they also speak Arabic. The *Qasídiy-i-'Izz-i-Varqá'íyyih*, revealed by Bahá'u'lláh in Sulaymáníyyih at the request of His Kurdish hosts, is in Arabic. See *Athar-i-Qalam-i-A'ala*, p. 196
- ³¹ Provisional translation from the Arabic edition in of the Most Holy Book, *Al-Kitáb Al-Aqdas*, prepared by a special committee, Published by the Universal House of Justice, ISBN-0-99967-132-6, printed in Canada by Quebecor Jasper Printing, (no date).
- ³² Provisional translation of the Arabic text which is quoted in "Muntakhabat Min Kitáb Bahá'u'lláh Wal 'Asr Al-Jadid", J. Esslemont, 1995 ed. p. 222
- ³³ Ishraq Khavari, *Kanj-i-Shayegan*, Mo'assayieh Milli Matbouaat Amri, 124 Badí', p. 204
- ³⁴ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, (Ocean) p. 381)

- ³⁵ Bahá'u'lláh, *Athar-i-Qalam-e-Aala*, vol 4, *Mo'assayieh Milli Matbouaat Amri*, p 66
- ³⁶ Bahá'u'lláh, *Athar-i-Qalam-e-Aala*, vol 6, *Mo'assayieh Milli Matbouaat Amri*, p 86. The Tablet is about 34 pages.
- ³⁷ Siyyid Dawudi is probably Siyyid Dawudi an-Naqshbandi al-Khalidi, who was one of the 'ulama and a shaykh of the Khalidiya section of the Sufi Naqshbandi order. He died in 1882. (H.M. Balyuzi, *Bahá'u'lláh - The King of Glory*, p. 124)
- ³⁸ Ibn-Alusi - one of the five sons of the famous Shaykh Mahmud al-Alusi, who died in 1854. It is not clear which son is referred to here, but he is probably one of the three eldest, 'Abdu'lláh, Bahá'u'd-Din, 'Abdu'l-Baqi and Siyyid Na'man, Khayru'd-Din. (H.M. Balyuzi, *Bahá'u'lláh - The King of Glory*, p. 124)
- ³⁹ a respectful reference to Bahá'u'lláh
- ⁴⁰ As a sign of respect, Bahá'u'lláh is addressed in the plural.
- ⁴¹ Bahá'u'lláh, *Athar-i-Qalam-e-Aala*, vol 4, *Mo'assayieh Milli Matbouaat Amri*, p. 215-220 p. The text in italics below is a provisional translation. The author is aware that certain parts of this Tablet have a formal translation, but it was not available at the time of preparing this paper. "A 'ráb" is the plural of "arab."
- ⁴² Note that Bahá'u'lláh is here identifying Iraq to be the Land of the Arabs.
- ⁴³ "Alef", the first letter of the Arabic alphabet resembles a straight vertical line.
- ⁴⁴ 'Dal', another letter of the Arabic alphabet, appears like a bent over 'alef'.
- ⁴⁵ Unpublished Tablet number 06136 at the Bahá'í World Archives.
- ⁴⁶ "Mullá Aliy-i-Bastámí, though the first to fall a victim to the relentless hate of the enemy, underwent his persecution in Iraq, which lay beyond the confines of Persia." (Shoghi Effendi, *The Dawn-Breakers*, p. 146)
- ⁴⁷ "Among the men who in Karbila eagerly embraced, through the efforts of Tahirih, the Cause of the Báb, was a certain Shaykh Salih, an Arab resident of that city who was the first to shed his blood in the path of the Faith, in Tihran. She was so profuse in her praise of Shaykh Salih that a few suspected him of being equal in rank to Quddus." (Shoghi Effendi, *The Dawn-Breakers*, p. 270) (The author wishes to express his gratitude to Dr. Moojan Momen for pointing this out.)
- ⁴⁸ Dr. J.E. Esslemont, *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era*, (Ocean), p. 209

