# The Cyprus exiles

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[Published in *Bahá’í Studies Bulletin*, 5:3–6:1, pp. 84–113]

[1991–06]

Bahá’u’lláh made an open declaration in Edirne in about 1866 of his claim to be the messianic figure “He Whom God shall make manifest” prophesied by the Báb. Bahá’u’lláh’s half-brother, Mírzá Yaḥyá, who had been widely considered the leader of the Bábís, rejected this claim and so a split occurred in the Bábí community. Eventually, this split was resolved in favour of Bahá’u’lláh as some 90% of Bábís became followers of Bahá’u’lláh. This article is mainly concerned with the fate of Mírzá Yaḥyá, the unsuccessful rival of Bahá’u’lláh.

After the events that led to the split between Bahá’u’lláh and Mírzá Yaḥyá, two of Mírzá Yaḥyá’s leading supporters, Sayyid Muḥammad Iṣfahání and Áqá Ján Big-i Kaj-Kuláh went to Istanbul. According to Bahá’í histories, while there they began to stir up trouble with the Ottoman authorities against the Bahá’ís.[[1]](#footnote-1) At about the same time, a number of Bahá’u’lláh’s supporters also went to live in Istanbul. One group was Mírzá ‘Alí Sayyáḥ, Mishkín-Qalam, and Áqá Jamshíd Gurjí. It appears that they had found it difficult to earn a living in Edirne and thought that with Mishkín-Qalam’s talent for calligraphy, they would fare better in Istanbul.[[2]](#footnote-2) A while later, Bahá’u’lláh instructed Darvísh Ṣidq-‘Alí, Áqá Muḥammad-Báqir Maḥallátí (Qahvihchi) and Ustád Muḥammad-‘Alí Salmání to proceed to Istanbul in order to sell some horses that had been sent to Bahá’u’lláh.[[3]](#footnote-3) Áqá ‘Abdu’l-Ghaffár Iṣfahání had also been sent to Istanbul.[[4]](#footnote-4)

In about early 1868, these seven Bahá’ís in Istanbul were arrested together with the two followers of Mírzá Yaḥyá who were also in Istanbul.[[5]](#footnote-5) A short time later, Bahá’u’lláh and companions were arrested in Edirne and precipitously sent to Gallipoli, not knowing their ultimate destination

All of those who were arrested in Edirne with Bahá’u’lláh were eventually sent to ‘Akká with him but a different fate awaited the seven followers of Bahá’u’lláh arrested in Istanbul. Only one of them was sent with the rest of the exiles to ‘Akká, Darvísh Ṣidq-‘Alí. Two of them were sent back to Iran, Ustád Muḥammad-‘Alí Salmání and Áqá Jamshíd. The other four were condemned to imprisonment in Cyprus along with Azal and his family. The two followers of Mírzá Yaḥyá that were also arrested in Istanbul were sent to ‘Akká.

On 31 August 1868, the Austrian Lloyd liner carrying Bahá’u’lláh and his companions reached Haifa. As the exiles were disembarking, Áqá ‘Abdu’l-Ghaffár, one of the four condemned to go on to Cyprus threw himself into the sea. He was rescued and resuscitated but the officials would not alter the sentence and he was taken on to Cyprus.

The exiles arriving at Famagusta in Cyprus on 5 September 1868 were:

Followers of Bahá’u’lláh:

1. Áqá ‘Abdu’l-Ghaffár Iṣfahání

2. Mírzá ‘Alí Sayyáḥ

3. Mishkín-Qalam

4. Áqá Muḥammad-Báqir Maḥallátí (Qahvihchi)

Mírzá Yaḥyá and family:

1. Mírzá Yaḥyá, Ṣubḥ-i-Azal

2. Fáṭimah, wife

3. Ruqayya, wife

4. Aḥmad, son

5. Riḍván-‘Alí, son

6. ‘Abdu’l-‘Alí, son

7. Rafí‘a, daughter

8. Bahjat Raf‘at, daughter

9. Ṭal‘at, daughter

10. Fáṭimah, daughter[[6]](#footnote-6)

Two servants also accompanied the exiles, one named Ruqiyya was a servant of Shaykh ‘Alí Sayyáḥ, the other was Mishkín-Qalam’s.

The exiles, after interrogation by the police, were allocated houses in Famagusta. It is not clear from the records and accounts whether the family of Shaykh ‘Alí Sayyáḥ, one of the followers of Bahá’u’lláh, accompanied them on their arrival or joined them later (probably the latter as one account gives the total number of the exiles as 14 persons and two servants[[7]](#footnote-7)).

Áqá ‘Abdu’l-Ghaffár escaped from Cyprus on 29 September 1870 and went to ‘Akká. He lived in the Khán-i-Afranj and in order to conceal his identity he changed his name to Áqá ‘Abdu’lláh. After the passing of Bahá’u’lláh, he moved to Damascus where he died.

Mírzá ‘Alí Sayyáḥ died in Famagusta on 4 August 1871. His widow, Fáṭimah, married Mishkín Qalam.

Mishkín-Qalam moved from Famagusta to Nicosia in 1879, and to Larnaca in 1885. He was employed by Mr Cobham, Commissioner at Larnaca, as Persian secretary. His departure from Cyprus is noted in a letter from Cobham, dated 18 September 1886: “The Persian heresiarch and calligraphist Mushkín Kalam left Cyprus for St. Jean d’Acre on the night of Tuesday September 14-15, renouncing his pittances and the protection of the Island Government. He found an unwonted opportunity in a Syrian vessel going directly to Acre ….”[[8]](#footnote-8) It appears that some members of Mishkín-Qalam’s family remained in Cyprus, at least for a time, since a list of pilgrims to ‘Akká shows the arrival of Mishkín-Qalam’s son, ‘Alí-Akbar, from Cyprus on 29 March 1888 for a stay of 116 days.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Áqá Muḥammad-Báqir Maḥallátí died on 22 November 1872 (in Famagusta?).

During his time in Cyprus, Mishkín Qalam had succeeded in converting a Turkish Cypriot by the name of Na‘ím Effendi. He came to ‘Akká twice. He achieved a high position in later life and his sons were also prominent in Cyprus and Turkey in government and the military. It is not clear what happened to this family. The descendants of Na‘ím Effendi have been traced by the present-day Cyprus Bahá’í community and do not appear know anything about the Bahá’í Faith.

## The family of Mírzá Yaḥyá

Mírzá Yaḥyá is reputed to have been an uxorious man. His own son Riḍván-‘Alí reports him to have had eleven or twelve wives[[10]](#footnote-10) while another source gives fourteen

wives.[[11]](#footnote-11) The following table is the best that the present author has managed thus far by way of a reconstruction of Mírzá Yaḥyá’s wives and their children.

The sources for this list are abbreviated as follows:

T Browne, *Traveller’s Narrative*, pp. 384–6.

P Browne, “Personal Reminiscences”, pp. 766–7.

M Browne, *Materials*, pp. 314, 321–2.

J Notes of Jalal Azal at Princeton University Library, pp. 560–572.

C Browne’s notebook for his journey to Cyprus and ‘Akká in 1890, University of Cambridge, Browne Manuscripts, Sup. 21 (8), p. 20.

S the genealogical table compiled by Shoghi Effendi and published in *Bahá’í World*, vol. 5: 1932–4, New York: Bahá’í Publishing Committee, 1936, between pp. 204 and 205.

K Malik-Khusravi, *Iqlim-i-Nur*, pp. 202–205

I information obtained during my trip to Cyprus.

1. Wife: Fáṭimah,[[12]](#footnote-12) daughter of Mírzá Muḥammad, the younger full brother of Mírzá Buzurg Núrí and thus Mírzá Yaḥyá’s cousin. Married in Iran in about 1850. She was arrested when Government troops attacked Tákur. Mírzá Yaḥyá left her behind with the children when he fled to Baghdad. Resided in Tákur. (T, M, J, K)

 Children:

i) Muḥammad Hádí, b. 1848, Tihran; d. 1896, Tihran. (T, P, M, J, S, K)

 had descendants living in Iran, among whom are:

 a) Mahdí (S)

 b) Ḍíyá’u’lláh (S)

ii) Muḥammad Mahdí, died young (J)

2. Wife: Narjis. Married in Iran. Left behind when Mírzá Yaḥyá fled (J)

iii) son (J)

3. Wife: Maryam, known as Qánita.[[13]](#footnote-13) Married in Iran. Left behind in Baghdad in the care of Mírzá Ja‘far Naráqí when Mírzá Yaḥyá moved on to Istanbul. They returned to Iran in 1286/1869–70 (J, K)

iv) Mírzá Núru’lláh, b. 1848—a physician who lived at Rasht. Visited Cyprus on at least three occasions, once being in 1878 (T, P, M, J, S). He had many wives and children, among whom:

 a) ‘Abdu’l-‘Alí (S)

 b) Aḥmad (Rúḥu’lláh), visited Cyprus in 1896 (P, S)

 aa) ‘Ináyat, ‘Ináyatu’lláh, b. c. 1889 (P, S)

 bb) ‘Aṭiyyih (S)

 c) Maryam (S)

 d) ‘Alíyyih (S)

One of these two daughters was called Khánum Gul and married Mutarjim Humáyún[[14]](#footnote-14) (S, K)

aa) Húshang (S)

bb) Manúchihr (S)

cc) Fakhru’z-Zamán (S)

4. Fáṭimah (Mulk-i-Jahán, Malakih Khánum) of Shiraz, the sister of Mírzá Báqir. Married in Iran. Followed her husband to Baghdad, Edirne and Famagusta. d. 868 in Famagusta. (T, M, J, C, K)

v) Aḥmad Bahháj. b. 1853. m. ‘Ulaviyya (or Fáṭimah). Moved to Istanbul in

1884. His wife and two daughters adopted Protestantism in Istanbul. He moved to Haifa in 1921. d. 1933 and is buried in Bahá’í cemetery in Haifa. (For further details on him see below). (T, P, M, J, C, S, K)

Daughters:

a) ‘Ádila (‘Ádila Sulṭān, Áyatu’lláh) b. Cyprus, 1880, moved to Istanbul—then moved to France and later became a missionary in Algeria. d. Switzerland—no issue. (P, M, J, S)

b) ‘Ala’iyya (Grace)—married a German and went to live in Federal Republic of Germany - one son, one daughter (J, S)

vi) ‘Abdu’l-‘Alí, (known as ‘Alí Effendi) b. 1857–8. Was a cloth merchant. m. ‘Iṣmat, daughter of Sayyid Muḥammad. Lived on in Famagusta. Died 1956. (T, P, M, J, C, S, I, K)

Children:

a) Waḥída—a spinster, died of cancer of the breast (J, I)

b) Nayyira—was taken to Haifa by her uncle Aḥmad but later returned to Cyprus—a spinster (had been engaged to a pilot who was killed in the war; is said to have gone mad after this) (J, I)

c) Jalál Azal (Celal Ezel)—went to visit ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and through him was employed in the Palestine civil service. Some time after 1948, he returned to Cyprus and was employed at a radio monitoring station in Cyprus—m. ‘Iṣmat, daughter of Badí‘u’lláh, son of Bahá’u’lláh. d. 5 April 1971. No children. (For further details of him see below.) (J, S)

d) ‘Alíma—married a Turk, Fáḍil Urfzadih (Fazel Orfzade). Is said to be still alive (J, I) Children:

aa) Sule Orfi (Shulay ‘Urfí) married Mr Hakki Suha, a prominent newspaper owner and later in charge of a television station. He died in 1987. She herself is a prominent person in Nicosia, works in the Australian High Commission and the U.N. High Commission for Refugees. Have several children (I)

bb) Dr Ezel (Orfzade (‘Urfí). Has English wife and is now living in Canada and is a radiologist. Returned to Cyprus for a time in 1970 (I)

e) Ṭáli‘a—married but died without issue (J)

f) The list of Riḍván-‘Alí contains several other names. I am not sure if these are the same as the above or may have been children who did not survive to adulthood:

‘Aẓíma Sulṭań, Saṭwatu’lláh, together with a daughter who died when 14 days old (P)

vii) Riḍván-‘Alí, b. 1863. Went to Istanbul to join his brother Aḥmad. Visited ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Haifa in about 1894. Adopted Christianity, took the name Constantine the Persian and married a Greek woman. Lived for a time in Larnaca where he was employed by Mr Cobham the British Commissioner—died without issue in about 1917 (T, P, M, J, C, S, K)

viii) Muḥammad (Mehmed, Bayánu’lláh, Wálí-Muḥammad, Jamálu’lláh), b. 1867. Described in 1912 as “not quite right in the head”.[[15]](#footnote-15) Went to Istanbul for a time to join his brother Aḥmad. Came to Haifa in

 the time of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, but proved troublesome and so was sent to Iran, where he was put into the care of his half-brother Mírzá Núru’lláh. m. an Iranian woman and died without issue (T, P, M, J, S, K[[16]](#footnote-16))

5. Wife: Ruqiyya, known as Ḥajjiyya, was sister of Fáṭimah, Mírzá Yaḥyá’s first wife (see above) and thus also cousin of Mírzá Yaḥyá. Married in Baghdad. d. Cyprus. (T, M, J, C, K16)

ix) Raf‘at (Bahjat Raf‘at, Bahjat al-Quds, Raf‘atu’lláh) b. 1861–2. died a spinster (T, P, J, C)

x) Fu’ád (Fu’ádu’lláh). b. 1868–9. d. unmarried, Famagusta, 1888 (T, P, J, K)

xi) ‘Abdu’l-Waḥíd (also known as ‘Abdu’l-Jalíl, Muḥammad Jamíl, ‘Abdu’r-Rashíd and is also probably identical with the Vaḥíd on some lists). b. 1871–2. m. Ḥamída, daughter of Mírzá Muṣṭafá (Mírzá Ismá‘íl Ṣabbágh). He died without issue and his wife returned to Iran with her father and remarried (T, P, J, S, K)

xi) Maryam, b. 1873—moved to Tihran in a.h. 1315 (1897), married her cousin in Iran and left several children, among whom: (T, J, S, K)

a) ‘Alíyyih (S)

b) Maymanat (S)

xiii) Taqíu’d-Dín, also called Ḍiyá‘u’d-Dín, b. 1876–8. He died unmarried but in his will, he recognised an illegitimate son (from an affair with a Turkish Cypriot married woman, the wife of ‘Alí Rúḥí): (T, P, M, J, S, K, I)

a) Riza Ezel, to whom he left a plot of land near Mírzá Yaḥyá’s grave. Riza Ezel worked in the Customs department and is currently the caretaker of Mírzá Yaḥyá’s grave and lives in a nearby house. (I)

aa) Ruhi Ezel, the son of Riza is in the Police force in Cyprus (I)

xiv) Muḥtaram, this may be the same as Raf‘at above (S, K)

6. Wife: Fáṭimah, the second wife of the Báb, the sister of Mullá Rajab-‘Alí Iṣfahání; married in Baghdad in about 1854–6 (while Bahá’u’lláh was wandering in the hills of Sulaymáníyyih) for about a month before divorcing her and giving her in marriage to Sayyid Muḥammad Iṣfahání.[[17]](#footnote-17)

7. Wife: Badrí-Ján (Badr-i-Jahán), the sister of Mírzá Naṣru’lláh and Mírzá Riḍá-Qulí Tafrishí; married in Baghdad but she had refused to live with him after a time and was exiled to ‘Akká with Bahá’u’lláh. She was sent to Cyprus by her brother but still refused to live with Mírzá Yaḥyá and went to live in Nicosia instead. In 1886, she moved to Izmir and then to Istanbul where her daughters married. In 1888, she returned to Cyprus and died there after Azal (J)

xv) Safiyya (Rafiyya), b. 1861; exiled to Cyprus with her father, then moved to Istanbul with her mother in 1886. Married Mírzá Áqá Khán Kirmání. But after two years left him and returned to Cyprus. Returned to Istanbul in about 1889. Died without issue (T, J, C, K[[18]](#footnote-18))

xvi) Ṭal‘at or Ṭal‘atu’lláh, b. 1864; exiled to Cyprus with her father, then moved to Istanbul with her mother in 1886. Married Shaykh ‘Alí Rúḥí. Left her husband in 1888 and returned to Cyprus. Returned to Istanbul in about 1889. She later remarried to Mírzá Mahdí of Isfahan and died in childbirth (T, J, C, K)

 Children from her first husband:

a) Muḥammad Ḍíyá’u’lláh (Núru’d-Dín, Kalímu’d-Dín,

‘Iẓámu’d-Dín), died before 1896. (P)

b) Fáḍila (Fáḍila Sulṭán). d. unmarried. (P, J)

c) ‘Alíyya. Married to Tám ibn ‘Abdu’s-Salám, no issue[[19]](#footnote-19) (J)

d) The list of Riḍván-‘Alí also contains the name Abadiyya Sulṭán—this may be the last-named above (P)

8. Wife: Daughter of an Arab, married in Baghdad (K)

xvii) Mírzá Rivanu’lláh (K)

9. Wife: Daughter of Mullá ‘Abdu’l-Ghaní or, by some accounts, Mullá ‘Abdu’l-Faṭṭáḥ (K)

10. Wife: Daughter of Mírzá Haydar-Qulí Namad-sab‘; she was half-sister of Khánum-Ján, a cousin of Mírzá Yaḥyá (was possibly named Fáṭimah) (K)

11. Wife: the wife of Mullá Muḥammad Mu‘allim Núrí, who was martyred at Shaykh Ṭabarsí (K)

12. Wife: Ruqiyya, daughter of A‘raj Iṣfahání (K)

13. Wife: Nisá’ Khánum Ṭihrání (K)

14. Wife: Qánita, described as Ahl-i-Balada and a companion of Ṭáhirih when she was in Núr (K)

15. Wife: Ṣáḥib-Ján Iṣfahání (K)

xviii) Mírzá Rúḥu’lláh (K)

16. Wife: Wife of Shaykh ‘Alí Zanjání. Nabíl Zarandí reports that he heard from Áqá

 Yaḥyá, the son of Muḥammad Ḥasan-i-Fatá’, a leading Azalí of Qazvin, that when he went to Cyprus he heard the following from Shaykh ‘Alí Kaffash Zanjání[[20]](#footnote-20): His wife was taken into service in Mírzá Yaḥyá’s household in Cyprus. Later she said to him that Mírzá Yaḥyá wanted her and so her husband consented to this. A while later, she was turned out of Mírzá Yaḥyá’s house pregnant. Mírzá Yaḥyá and his eldest son Aḥmad accused each other of being the father. The matter eventually went before the local court (saráy). Áqá Yaḥyá wanted to check this story that he had heard and therefore he asked Mírzá Yaḥyá about it. The latter asserted that it was his son, Aḥmad, who had made the woman pregnant and on account of this he had withdrawn him from the position of being his heir and had made Mírzá Yaḥyá Dawlatábádí his heir.[[21]](#footnote-21)

17. Wife: Mírzá Yaḥyá married the wife of the martyr Mírzá ‘Abdu’l-Wahháb Shírází in Baghdad.[[22]](#footnote-22)

There are a number of other children mentioned in some of the sources whom I have not been able to place exactly:

xix) Hibatu’lláh or Jaẓbátu’lláh. b. 1860; a daughter who was in Istanbul in 1896—this may be another name for Safiyya (see above) (P)

xx) Mashiyyatu’lláh; a daughter who died in 1875, then aged 8 (P)

xxi) Maryam Sulṭán; b. 1876, married in Istanbul in 1895 (P)

xxii) Fáṭimah; d. 29 August 1871 (T, C)

xxiii) Rúḥu’lláh (S)

xxiv) Hamidih (5) 96 l

xxv) ‘Alíyyih (S,I)

a) Muḥammad Ríshat (Resat). A carpenter in Famagusta. Married a Turkish Cypriot woman named Munevver, d. 1986 (I)

aa) Ismet Ezel, works for the Famagusta lycee and is a part-time newspaper reporter (I)

There is another grand-daughter (?great-grand-daughter) of Azal whose name is Sirin Birinci and who lives in Nicosia (I). The number of Mírzá Yaḥyá’s wives led to some unusual domestic arrangements. An English observer describes a daily ritual that was to be observed in Famagusta:

He had two wives, each of whom had a separate house, and every day, at four in the afternoon, the first wife took him to the door of the second wife’s house and handed him over. After twenty-four hours had passed, and punctually at 4 p.m., the second wife took Subh-i-Ezel back and handed him over to the safe-keeping of the first wife.[[23]](#footnote-23)

After some years in Cyprus, Mírzá Yaḥyá was joined by three of his followers from Zanján: Áqá ‘Abdu’l-Aḥad,[[24]](#footnote-24) Ustád Maḥmúd and Shaykh ‘Alí Bakhsh.

Mírzá Yaḥyá remained a recluse in Famagusta—there are no reports of him going to the mosque or to coffee-shops. The inhabitants of Famagusta appear to have regarded him as Muslim holy man and Mírzá Yaḥyá went along with this. When people called to greet on Muslim feasts like Bayrám (it being customary to visit a holy man on such occasions), he accepted this. There was no attempt to teach the local people the Bábí or Azalí religious beliefs.

Although freed from the conditions of his exile in 1881 after the British occupation of Cyprus Mírzá Yaḥyá preferred to remain in Famagusta as a pensioner of the British Government. Mírzá Yaḥyá died on 29 April 1912 at the age of about 80. According to the account by his son, Riḍván-‘Alí, who had by this time become a Christian and taken the name Constantine the Persian, no “witnesses to the Bayan” (i.e. Babis) could be found to carry out the funeral ceremony and so it was carried out by the Imam-Jum‘a of Famagusta and other Muslim clerics.[[25]](#footnote-25)

All of Mírzá Yaḥyá’s family in Cyprus maintained an outward appearance of being Muslims. The people of Famagusta used to call them sun-worshippers because of their custom of leaving the city at sunrise to go to Mírzá Yaḥyá’s grave to pray. Mírzá Yaḥyá’s descendants at the present time appear to know little about their family history or religious past and can for all practical purposes be regarded as Turks and Muslims. Riza Ezel, the caretaker of Mírzá Yaḥyá’s grave at present, told us that his grand-father was a Muslim holy man. Since Jalal Azal’s death, his widow ‘Iṣmat has put an annual notice in the newspapers on the anniversary of his death inviting people to a Mevlid recital and Qur’án reading in his memory (this being the traditional Turkish Muslim custom).[[26]](#footnote-26)

## The grave of Mírzá Yaḥyá

The grave of Mírzá Yaḥyá was originally about a mile from the old walled city of Famagusta but the modern city has now encompassed it. The grave is situated inside a small simple flat-roofed shrine building about 7 metres by 5 metres with a small portico at the front. I was unable to ascertain the date of the building. Inside the building, there is a single bare-walled room with a low grave in the centre. There at two chairs at one end of the grave and at the other end of the grave there were placed three books:

• a Qur’án

• a hand-written volume consisting of a number of ziyarat-namihs (tablets of visitation) for Mírzá Yaḥyá, Ṭáhirih, ‘Aẓím, and other material

• a printed book of poems called Sham‘-i-Jam‘ by Fatḥu’lláh Qudsí (pen-name Fu’ád, of Kirman), presented by Jalíl Karímí (?) in 1366 (ad 1987).

At the same end of the room there are a number of items on the wall:

• on the right as viewed a plaque in English which reads: “The holy tomb of Ṣubḥ-i-Azal Mirror of God 1831–1912. The text on the wall has been written by the Báb, “The Primal Point’’—Great and Glorious is His Dignity—nominating Ṣubḥ-i-Azal as His Successor in the Babi Religion.”

• in the centre a portrait of Mírzá Yaḥyá. I was informed that it was painted by Dr. Philotheos Mughapghap, a well-known citizen of Famagusta,[[27]](#footnote-27) but that it is not a good likeness.

• on the left is the text referred to above of the nomination in Arabic. This also records the information that Mírzá Yaḥyá was born in 1247 and died at 7 in the morning on Saturday 12 Jamádí al-Awwal 1330.

The building is immediately surrounded by some twelve cypress trees and it is set in a field of some 10 acres. But the city is encroaching on it and a few years ago Mehmed Resat sold one large lot on the edge of this area which is already being built upon. The caretaker of the grave and shrine is a grandson of Mírzá Yaḥyá, Riza Ezel but the overall control rests with Mrs Sule Orfi.

## Aḥmad Bahháj and Jalál Azal

Aḥmad Bahháj was the eldest of Mírzá Yaḥyá’s children to accompany him to Cyprus. In 1884, he moved to Istanbul where he worked in a bank. He was joined there by his wife daughters. At some stage, his wife and daughters became Protestant Christians in Istanbul. In about 1899, Aḥmad’s employment at the bank ceased for some reason and by 1912, we find him impoverished and working as a railway porter in Famagusta. His wife daughters appear to have remained in Istanbul. Then in 1921, learning of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s presence in Palestine from his nephew Jalál and remembering ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s kindness to him as a young boy in Baghdad and Edirne, he came to Haifa.[[28]](#footnote-28) He appears to have become a Bahá’í and remained in Haifa as a rather reclusive figure until his death in 1933. He is buried in the Bahá’í cemetery in Haifa.

In about 1915, during the First World War, Jalál Azal, the son of ‘Abdu’l-‘Alí and grandson of Mírzá Yaḥyá, volunteered for service to the British Government and was sent as personal assistant, chief censor and head interpreter to Lt-Col. Bidwell who was in charge of a British prisoner-of-war camp in Madras in India. When one of the internees, Murad Bey of Baghdad, heard of his relationship to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, he praised ‘Abdu’l-Bahá greatly and urged Jalál in the strongest terms to seek out ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s guidance and assistance in his moral and material education. On his return to Cyprus, Jalál Azal wrote in 1920 to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, asking for permission to visit him. He was also responsible for bringing about Aḥmad Bahháj’s journey to Haifa. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá managed to get for Jalál Azal a good position in the Palestine Civil Service. He was Land Settlement Officer in the Land Court in the Haifa-‘Akká area. Jalál Azal remained therefore in Palestine. It is difficult to know whether he regarded himself as a Bahá’í at this time but almost certainly he was regarded by others as a Bahá’í and he was in communication with the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá’ís of the United States, for example.

After some years however, he appears to have become disaffected. This was also perhaps connected with his marriage to ‘Iṣmat, the daughter of Badí‘u’lláh, the son of Bahá’u’lláh and brother of Mírzá Muḥammad ‘Alí. At some time, presumably in 1948 at the end of British Mandate, he returned with his wife to Famagusta. He took up employment in the radio monitoring station at Cyrenia run by the American intelligence services.

Sometime in the 1950s or 1960s, Jalál Azal changed to active attempts to advance the Azalí cause and to attack the Bahá’í Faith. This may have been precipitated by the arrival in Famagusta of Bahá’í “pioneers” and the conversion of a number of local people well-known to Jalál Azal. There was a concerted effort by a number of people including Jalál Azal, his wife ‘Iṣmat, and her sister Qamar Músá Bahá’í (d. 10 November 1970), who had

married Músá Bahá’í, the son of Mírzá Muḥammad ‘Alí, to unite all three generations of the internal opponents of the Bahá’í Faith, the “Covenant-Breakers”.[[29]](#footnote-29) By three generations is meant:

• First generation: Followers of Mírzá Yaḥyá in his opposition to Bahá’u’lláh.

• Second generation: Followers of Mírzá Muḥammad ‘Alí in his opposition to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

• Third generation: Opponents of Shoghi Effendi, both from within the family of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and others such as Aḥmad Sohrab who rejected Shoghi Effendi’s authority.

This in itself was a remarkable event full of bizarre contradictions. In theory, the second generation accepting as it does Bahá’u’lláh should have had nothing to do with the first followers of Mírzá Yaḥyá. Similarly, the third generation, accounting themselves loyal followers of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, should have had nothing to do with the second generation who are based on opposition to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá (let alone supporting the first generation).[[30]](#footnote-30)

Jalál Azal was of course the Azalí link in this scheme. His wife and her sister Qamar Músá Bahá’í were representatives of the second generation and in close contact with the other members of the second generation. The second generation had already put themselves in close contact with the third generation. After the marriage of several of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s grand-children with the descendants of Sayyid ‘Alí Afnán (who had vacillated for some time between ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and Mírzá Muḥammad-‘Alí), almost all of the-descendants

of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá threw in their lot with the followers of Mírzá Muḥammad-‘Alí. Ríyáḍ, Shoghi Effendi’s brother, visited Jalál Azal in Cyprus on at least four occasions during which they exchanged information and material. Jalál Azal and his wife visited her relatives in Damascus. Yvonne, a daughter of ‘Izzu’d-Dín Wadúd, as well as Mírzá Jalál, the grandson of Mírzá Músá Kalím, both second generation opponents, collaborated with Aḥmad Sohrab, the New History Society and the Caravan of East and West, third generation opponents.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Part of this combined plotting was a court case raised by Qamar Bahá’í, Jalál the grandson of Mírzá Músá and others in about 1950-1, challenging Shoghi Effendi’s right to carry out major construction work around the shrine of Bahá’u’lláh. One of their key witnesses, Nayyir Afnán, died shortly before the case was due to open, and it all came to nothing. One of the culminations of this plotting was a grand meeting that was held in Famagusta in the late 1950s. Representatives of all three generations were present including: Jalál Azal, ‘Iṣmat and other representatives of the second generation opponents and Aḥmad Sohrab. One of the aims of this conference was to build a mausoleum over the grave of Mírzá Yaḥyá. To this end, an amount of money was collected but it “disappeared” and nothing came of the project.

Jalál Azal provided information to Dr Ímání from Beirut who was researching a book attacking the Bahá’í Faith. Later in America, Dr Ímání was in contact with Rev. William Miller. Ímání put Miller in touch with Jalál Azal. Between March 1967 and February 1971, the latter provided Miller with a great deal of material with which to attack the Bahá’í Faith in his book, *The Bahá’í Faith: its history and teachings*.[[32]](#footnote-32) Miller also arranged for the material that Jalál Azal had sent him to be deposited in Princeton University Library.

Jalál Azal died on 5 April 1971 of a cerebral stroke, exacerbated by his tendency to excessive alcohol consumption. His wife remained in Famagusta and used to commemorate his death by an annual announcement in the newspaper.

## Comparison and analysis

In 1972, Eric Cohen published a sociological analysis of the followers of Mírzá Muḥammad ‘Alí in ‘Akká.[[33]](#footnote-33) These were the Bahá’ís who, after the passing of Bahá’u’lláh in 1892, had turned away from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s leadership and attached themselves to his half-brother, Mírzá Muḥammad ‘Alí. Cohen found that from an initial position of strength within the Bahá’í community of ‘Akká, they had gradually declined into stagnation, inactivity and insignificance as compared to the main-line Bahá’í community which had continuously extended its activities and influence in the Haifa-‘Akká area.

Cohen was unable to find a suitable name in the existing sociological literature to describe this group. He rejected the application of the term “sect” to them because “though outwardly resembling a sect, [they had] sunk into a kind of ossification.” Cohen proposes the term “residual religious community” to describe them. In his paper, Cohen defines this as a community “either a remnant of a sect which was side-tracked by its rivals, or a once important religious organization, such as a church or denomination, which has gradually been reduced to relative insignificance.”[[34]](#footnote-34) He gives the remnants of the followers of Mírzá Muḥammad ‘Alí in ‘Akká as an example of a sect that has been side-tracked by its rivals, and the Samaritans as an example of a church that has been reduced to insignificance.

I was very struck by the parallels between the group in ‘Akká described by Cohen and the remnants of the Azalís in Cyprus. My brief enquiries during the few days that I was able

spend in Cyprus can scarcely be compared to Cohen’s research over a much more extended period. Therefore my findings are hardly adequate for anything more than a preliminary comparison. But within these limits, there are grounds for comparing the two groups.

Both groups can be described as having been side-tracked by a more successful rival. As Cohen has described, the faction of Mírzá Muḥammad ‘Alí (hereinafter called “the ‘Akká group”) began as a very serious challenge to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s leadership. Most of the leading Bahá’ís of ‘Akká supported the challenge as did almost all of Bahá’u’lláh’s family. Similarly, Mírzá Yaḥyá’s challenge to Bahá’u’lláh’s leadership was at first very serious. Mírzá Yaḥyá was widely regarded as the successor of the Báb and so his rejection of Bahá’u’lláh’s claim was a serious blow. Thus initially both groups began as very considerable challenge to their rivals.

Despite this initially strong position, both groups saw their position rapidly eroded as their rivals gained the initiative and won the allegiance of the majority of the community. Within a decade of the split, both groups had been comprehensively defeated and reduced to insignificance. Mírzá Muḥammad ‘Alí, was at first able to recruit most of the influential Bahá’ís of ‘Akká and several important figures in Iran. His flagging fortunes were then shored up again in 1900 when Ibrahim Kheiralla, the key Bahá’í teacher in America, defected to his side. During the 1930s and 1940s, a number of members of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s family disobeyed Shoghi Effendi and were expelled from the Bahá’í community. These effectively became incorporated into the ‘Akká group. But even these events were not sufficient to reverse the steady decline in his position. A similar course of events occurred with Mírzá Yaḥyá. Over 90% of the Bábís of Iran gave their allegiance to Bahá’u’lláh within a short period of his putting forward his claim. Browne, visiting Iran in 1888 was hard pressed to find any Azalís at all. Mírzá Yaḥyá’s position in Cyprus became increasingly isolated and marginal. Even of his sons, one became a Christian and another later joined ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Haifa.

another feature described by Cohen is the fact that these “residual religious communities” become inward-turning and defensive; they do not try to spread their beliefs. Part of their problem arises from their indefinite status with the authorities. Cohen describes how the main body of Bahá’ís remain outward-looking, innovative and expansionist (seeking new converts); they actively encourage the spread and universalisation of their religion. With them the religion is constantly grow and developing. The ‘Akká group became, by contrast, inward-turning, conservative and defensive, struggling to protects its interests and right to exist. It deplored the recruitment of various nationalities (especially Americans) to run the world centre in Haifa and the changes made in the religion as it adapted itself to these new cultures. It made no attempts to reach the non-Bahá’í world. Most of the literature produced by the group consisted of apologetics for its position vis-a-vis its rival. While the main body of Bahá’ís was recognized by the Israeli government as a separate religious community, the status of the ‘Akká group is undefined. Similarly the Azalís, especially in Cyprus, became an inward-turning and defensive group. It represented the conservative faction who did not like the changes that Bahá’u’lláh introduced It tried to become in effect an ossification of the structures of the earliest period of the religion, except that it could not really be that since it had neither the numbers nor the enthusiasm nor were the circumstances the same. It made no attempt to convert the local population or any other group. Its literature has mainly been polemics against Bahá’u’lláh. Its status as a group is indefinite in Turkish Cyprus.

Cohen states that part of the conservative and traditional aspect of the ‘Akká group is that it remains in effect Muslim. The members of the group attend mosque and receive religious services (for births, marriages, death, etc.) from the official Muslim establishment of ‘Akká. They remain socially identified with traditional Muslim family and social norms. This feature of outward blending with the established religious norm is also a feature of the Azalís in Cyprus. They are to all intents Turkish Muslims. They go to the mosque and receive religious services from the official Muslim establishment. ‘Iṣmat organized Mevlid recitations and Qur’án readings on the anniversaries of Jalál Azal’s death.

Cohen also makes the point that the ‘Akká group is threatened by extinction within one or two generations through intermarriage and assimilation into the Muslim population of ‘Akká. He does not make it a part of his definition of a “residual religious group” as those groups that are substantial churches or denominations such as the Samaritans are more able to preserve a distinct identity and maintain their social boundaries. The Cyprus Azalís are also in danger of extinction. They are already extensively intermarried with the local Turkish Cypriot population. It is difficult to see how they can maintain a separate identity for more than one or two more generations.

Cohen makes the point that although the ‘Akká group is small and threatened with extinction; it is also internally divided due to an ossified accumulation of the conflicts of the past. My sources for the Cyprus Azalís was not sufficiently informed to be able to tell me of any internal divisions. Jalál Azal however refuted the commonly-held position that Mírzá Hádí Dawlatábádí was the appointed successor to Mírzá Yaḥyá as the leader of the Azalís[[35]](#footnote-35) thus indicating the existence of splits among the Azalís.

Cohen refers to the fact that the ‘Akká group having been comprehensively defeated on all issues (especially to do with authority over the Bahá’í shrines), has acknowledged defeat, and ceased active opposition. The last serious attempt at active opposition was the 1952 court case.[[36]](#footnote-36) Similarly, the Azalís have long since ceased any active opposition. The short foray into activity by Jalal Azal in the 1960s was something of an anachronism. Indeed it difficult to see it as a serious attempt to revive the Azalí position. Had he been serious attempting to do this, he would scarcely have co-operated so enthusiastically with Rev. Miller, whose only interest was in combatting both Mírzá Yaḥyá’s and Bahá’u’lláh’s positions.

There is one final comparison to be made between the two groups, although this is a matter of historical accident and not a point in Cohen’s definition. Both groups acquired land outside the city in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Several of the ‘Akká group now find themselves wealthy since the city has grown out and their land is now prime development land. Similarly with the Cyprus Azalís, they have been able to benefit from properties and land acquired in the past which has now greatly increased in value.

It would appear therefore that the Azalí community of Cyprus provides a further example of Erik Cohen’s characterization of a “residual religious community”.

1. Hasan Balyuzi, *Bahá’u’lláh: the King of Glory,* Oxford: George Ronald, 1980, p. 248. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ustád Muḥammad ‘Alí Salmání, *My Memories of Bahá’u’lláh* (trans. M. Gail), Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1982, p.59 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Salmání, *Memories*, pp. 58–9. Balyuzi, *Bahá’u’lláh*, pp. 250–2. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Balyuzi, *Bahá’u’lláh*, p. 252. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Regarding the circumstances of these arrests, see Salmání, *Memories*, pp. 58–65; Balyuzi, *Bahá’u’lláh*, pp. 248, 250–2. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. List in Browne’s diary of trip to Cyprus and ‘Akká, Browne manuscripts, Cambridge University Library, Sup. 21(8), p. 20; as amended in E. G. Browne, *A Traveller’s Narrative written to illustrate the Episode of the Báb*, Cambridge: University Press, 1891, vol. 2, pp. 376–389. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Browne, *Traveller’s Narrative*, p. 381. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Browne, *Traveller’s Narrative*, p. 388 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Manuscript list of pilgrims that came to ‘Akká in 1304–5, copy in Afnán library; original in Haifa. It would also appear that Mishkín-Qalam’s wife (the widow of Shaykh ‘Alí Sayyáḥ) stayed on in Cyprus; see *Traveller’s Narrative*, p. 387, the last few lines of the table are on this page. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Browne, “Personal Reminiscences of the Babi Insurrection at Zanjan in 1850, written by Aqa ‘Abdu’l-Ahad-i-Zanjani”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, (1897, pp. 761–827) p. 767. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Muḥammad ‘Alí Malik-Khusravi, *Iqlim-i-Nur*, Ṭihrán: Mu’assisih Matbu‘at Amri, 115 B.E./1958 pp. 202-5 [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Also called Ḥajjiyya by Sayyid Mahdí Dihjí in his risála, Browne Manuscripts, Cambridge University Library, mss no. F.57, p. 94 and in Malik-Khusravi, *op cit*. p. 202; but in other accounts her sister Ruqiyya, see below, is called Ḥajjiyya. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Sayyid Mahdí Dihjí, in his risála (Browne Manuscripts, Cambridge University Library, Mss no. F. 57, pp. 94, 189), states that she was from Isfahan. Malik-Khusraví states that she was from Kirmanshah (*op. cit*., p. 203). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Shoghi Effendi’s genealogical chart (*Bahá’í World*, vol. 5: 1932–4, between pp. 204 and 205), however, seems to have Khánum-Gul as a daughter of Mírzá Yaḥyá himself. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. E. G. Browne, *Materials for the Study of the Babi Religion*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1918, p. 314. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Malik-Khusravi incorrectly makes him the son of Badrí-Ján [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Hasan M Balyuzi, *Edward Granville Browne and the Bahá’í Faith*, London: George Ronald, 1970, p. 35n. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Malik-Khusravi incorrectly has her as the daughter of Fáṭima Mulk-i-Jahán. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Mazandarani, *Zuhur al-Haqq*, vol. 6 (manuscript), pp. 906–7. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Presumably the same as Shaykh ‘Alí Bakhsh Zanjání met by Browne in Cyprus. See “Personal Reminiscences of the Babi Insurrection at Zanjan in 1850”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 29 (1897) 761. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Mazandarani, *Zuhur al-Haqq*, vol. 6, p. 541n–2n. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Mazandarani, *Zuhur al-Haqq*, vol. 6, p. 1010. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Rupert Gunnis, *Historic Cyprus*, London: Methuen, 1936, p. 89. I am grateful to Mr Tacgey Debes for this reference. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. He was the author of the account of the Zanján upheaval which E. G. Browne published: “Personal reminiscences of the Babi Insurrection at Zanjan in 1850”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 29, 1897, pp. 761–827. Sayyid Mihdi Dihjí reports that this man was the brother of Áqá Naqd-‘Alí ‘Abá’ Baṣír, the blind Bahá’í who was martyred in about 1867; Risála of Sayyid Mihdí Dihjí, University of Cambridge Library, Browne mss, F57, p. 286. While it is certainly true that Áqá ‘Abdu’l-Aḥad had a brother Áqá Naqd-‘Alí as he states in his reminiscences (p. 780), the account does not seem to indicate that this brother was blind as ‘Abá’ Baṣír had been since childhood. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Browne, *Materials for the Study of the Babi Religion*, p. 312. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. The information in the last two paragraphs was obtained during my trip to Cyprus in October and November 1989. I am most grateful to Mr Mustafa Salman and Mr Erol Olkar, two Bahá’ís of Famagusta whose families have been closely associated with Mírzá Yaḥyá’s descendants. I am also grateful to Mr Tacgey Debes for much information conveyed to me in correspondence since my visit. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Presumably the same person as in Browne, *Materials*, p. 314. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Based on statements made by Aḥmad to Lady Blomfield in 1922; Lady Blomfield, *The Chosen Highway*, Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1967, pp. 237–8. See also Balyuzi, *Bahá’u’lláh, King of Glory*, p. 232n. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Evidence for this plan comes in Peter Berger, “From Sect to Church: a sociological interpretation of the Bahá’í movement”, Ph.D. Thesis, New School for Social Research, New York, 1954, p. 140, n. 4; *Azal’s Notes*, Princeton University Library, see *supra*. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. I was informed by the Cyprus Bahá’ís that in fact ‘Iṣmat, although married to Jalál Azal, had no time for Mírzá Yaḥyá’s claims and openly derided these even in front of her husband. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. One of the main episodes in this planned attack was a court case over access to the shrine of Bahá’u’lláh. This case was brought by Qamar Bahá’í, who was a second generation opponent and the star witness was to have been Nayyir Afnán, who was married to Shoghi Effendi’s sister and was a third generation opponent. But the death of the latter in 1952 aborted the plan. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. South Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1974. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. “The Bahá’í community of Acre”, *Folklore Research Center Studies*, vol. 3 (1972), pp. 119–141. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Cohen, “Bahá’í community”, p. 140. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Jalál Azal’s *Notes*, pp. 557, 791–2; this is alluded to in Miller, *The Bahá’í Faith*, p. 107, 114, n. 53. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. See note 30 above. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)