

Questions and Answers on War and Related Issues

“War is really nothing more but the result of existing forces. Should we desire to end that devastating consequence we should go back to the basic causes and remedy those evils. We should eliminate the hatreds, national bigotry, mistrust and self-aggrandizement as well as economic, social and religious differences which now prevail in the world if we desire to establish an abiding peace. And nothing can achieve this save the Teachings of Bahá'u'lláh, for they change the human heart and also prescribe definite precepts that would render our social environment healthy and peaceful.” (*From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, May 11, 1932*)

Q: Is war always wrong?

No. Shoghi Effendi described the system of collective security envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh as one “in which a single code of international law—the product of the considered judgment of the world’s federated representatives—shall have as its sanction the instant and coercive intervention of the combined forces of the federated units.” This enforcement of universally accepted standards of justice might occasionally necessitate the use of force, as explained by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in *The Secret of Divine Civilization*:

“A conquest can be a praiseworthy thing, and there are times when war becomes the powerful basis of peace, and ruin the very means of reconstruction. If, for example, a high-minded sovereign marshals his troops to block the onset of the insurgent and the aggressor, or again, if he takes the field and distinguishes himself in a struggle to unify a divided state and people, if, in brief, he is waging war for a righteous purpose, then this seeming wrath is mercy itself, and this apparent tyranny the very substance of justice and this warfare the cornerstone of peace. Today, the task befitting great rulers is to establish universal peace, for in this lies the freedom of all peoples.” (*pp. 70-71*)

It is clear that, in too many cases, nations today continue to be motivated not by a genuine desire for world peace, but rather by prejudice and self-interest. The world is undoubtedly moving towards the Divine System laid out by Bahá'u'lláh, however, Shoghi Effendi significantly referred to the League of Nations’ condemnation of Italy’s aggression in Ethiopia as “the first time in the history of humanity” that “the system of collective security, foreshadowed by Bahá'u'lláh and explained by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá” had been “seriously envisaged, discussed and tested.” Years later, the Universal House of Justice referred to the then recently concluded Gulf War in similar terms:

“The forces which united the remedial reactions of so many nations to the sudden crisis in this region demonstrated beyond any doubt the necessity of the principle of collective security prescribed by Bahá'u'lláh more than a century ago as a means of resolving conflict. While the international arrangement envisioned by Him for the full application of this principle is far from having been adopted by the rulers of mankind, a long step towards the behavior outlined for the nations by the Lord of the Age has thus been taken. How illuminating are Bahá'u'lláh’s words foreshadowing the future reorientation of the nations: ‘Be united, O concourse of the sovereigns of the world,’ He wrote, ‘for

thereby will the tempest of discord be stilled amongst you, and your peoples find rest. Should any one among you take up arms against another, rise ye all against him, for this is naught but manifest justice.’ ” (*The Universal House of Justice, Ridván Message 1991*)

Q: Are Bahá'ís pacifists?

No. The Bahá'í Teachings require that Bahá'ís obey the laws of the government under which they live. Bahá'ís do not on the grounds of religious conviction seek to abandon their obligation as citizens; instead, they are able to reconcile their fundamental spiritual convictions and their civil obligations as citizens by applying for non-combatant status under the existing laws and regulations.

Bahá'ís strive towards world peace, and we believe that, despite the conflicts which erupt throughout the world, eventual world peace is inevitable. As the Universal House of Justice states in a letter of February 9, 1967:

“...Bahá'ís recognize the right and duty of governments to use force for the maintenance of law and order and to protect their people. Thus, for a Bahá'í, the shedding of blood for such a purpose is not necessarily essentially wrong. The Bahá'í Faith draws a very definite distinction between the duty of an individual to forgive and ‘to be killed rather than to kill’ and the duty of society to uphold justice. This matter is explained by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in *Some Answered Questions*. In the present condition of the world Bahá'ís try to keep themselves out of the internecine conflicts that are raging among their fellow men and to avoid shedding blood in such struggles, but this does not mean that we are absolute pacifists.”

The letter of the Universal House of Justice goes on to explain this in the following statement written by the Guardian’s secretary on his behalf on November 21, 1935:

“With reference to the absolute pacifists, or conscientious objectors to war; their attitude, judged from the Bahá'í standpoint, is quite anti-social and due to its exaltation of the individual conscience leads inevitably to disorder and chaos in society. Extreme pacifists are thus very close to the anarchists, in the sense that both of these groups lay an undue emphasis on the rights and merits of the individual. The Bahá'í conception of social life is essentially based on the subordination of the individual will to that of society. It neither suppresses the individual nor does it exalt him to the point of making him an anti-social creature, a menace to society. As in everything, it follows the ‘golden mean’. The only way that society can function is for the minority to follow the will of the majority.” (*From a letter of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States, February 9, 1967*)

The same statement on behalf of the Guardian closes by reminding the friends of the way that peace can be attained:

“The other main objection to the conscientious objectors is that their method of establishing peace is too negative. Non-co-operation is too passive a philosophy to become an effective way for social reconstruction. Their refusal to bear arms can never establish peace. There should first be a spiritual revitalization which nothing, except the Cause of God, can effectively bring to every man’s heart.” (*ibid.*)

Q: Do Bahá’ís believe in disarmament?

Yes. However, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explained in an interview found in *'Abdu'l-Bahá in Canada*, pp. 34-35:

“As to the question of disarmament, all nations must disarm at the same time. It will not do at all, and it is not proposed, that some nations shall lay down their arms while others, their neighbors, remain armed. The peace of the world must be brought about by international agreement. All nations must agree to disarm simultaneously...No nation can follow a peace policy while its neighbor remains warlike. There is no justice in that. Nobody would dream of suggesting that the peace of the world could be brought about by any such line of action. It is to be brought about by a general and comprehensive international agreement, and in no other way...”

On January 12, 1983, a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice further addressed the scope of disarmament and its political implications, stating:

“At the present time, the subject of nuclear disarmament has become very much a political issue, with demonstrations taking place not only in the United States but also in England and some western European countries. To single out nuclear disarmament falls short of the Bahá’í position and would involve the Faith in the current disputes between nations. It is very clear that Bahá’ís believe disarmament, not only of nuclear weapons but of biological, chemical and all other forms, is essential.”

Q: What is collective security?

The concept of collective security is described by Bahá'u'lláh in *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, and later elaborated upon by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in *The Secret of Divine Civilization*. Bahá'u'lláh says:

“The time must come when the imperative necessity for the holding of a vast, an all-embracing assemblage of men will be universally realized. The rulers and kings of the earth must needs attend it, and, participating in its deliberations, must consider such ways and means as will lay the foundations of the world’s Great Peace amongst men...Should any king take up arms against another, all should unitedly arise and prevent him.” (*Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 249)

'Abdu'l-Bahá says, in *The Secret of Divine Civilization*:

“They [sovereigns] must conclude a binding treaty and establish a covenant, the provisions of which shall be sound, inviolable and definite. They must proclaim it to all the world and obtain for it the sanction of all the human race. This supreme and noble undertaking –the real source of the peace and well being of all the world—should be regarded as sacred by all that dwell on earth. All the forces of humanity must be mobilized to ensure the stability and permanence of this Most Great Covenant. In this all-embracing Pact the limits and frontiers of each and every nation should be clearly fixed, the principles underlying the relations of governments towards one another definitely laid down, and all international agreements and obligations ascertained. In like manner, the size of the armaments of every government should be strictly limited. For if the preparations for war and the military forces of any nation should be allowed to increase, they will arouse the suspicion of others. The fundamental principle underlying this solemn Pact should be so fixed that if any government later violate any one of its provisions, all the governments on earth should arise to reduce it to utter submission, nay the human race as a whole should resolve, with every power at its disposal, to destroy that government.” (*‘Abdu'l-Bahá, The Secret of Divine Civilization, pp 64-65*)

However, even if such a collective security treaty were enacted, alone it would not be sufficient to bring about peace and security. The Universal House of Justice wrote in *The Promise of World Peace*:

“Two points bear emphasizing in all these issues. One is that the abolition of war is not simply a matter of signing treaties and protocols; it is a complex task requiring a new level of commitment to resolving issues not customarily associated with the pursuit of peace. Based on political agreements alone, the idea of collective security is a chimera. The other point is that the primary challenge in dealing with issues of peace is to raise the context to the level of principle, as distinct from pure pragmatism. For, in essence, peace stems from an inner state supported by a spiritual or moral attitude, and it is chiefly in evoking this attitude that the possibility of enduring solutions can be found.” (*The Universal House of Justice, The Promise of World Peace, 1985, p. 27*)

Q. How can we view the current world events in light of the principle of collective security?

The Universal House of Justice writes:

“...as can readily be seen, the application of collective security has yet to mature in an evolving process which derives its efficacy from a solidarity of purpose arrived at through unity of vision and action on the part of all the nations. The ways of applying it will of necessity differ from case to case and take time, with the trials and reverses such challenges entail, to acquire the status of a confirmed international policy. Ups and downs of so crucial a development in the ordering of human affairs throughout the planet are inevitable; it is therefore not possible, nor is it wise, for Bahá'ís to judge the elements of what is happening in the primal attempts at employing this principle. They can, however, take heart from the efforts that have been and will be made to effect it

that what Bahá'u'lláh has prescribed is indeed coming to pass step by step.” (*From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, February 26, 2003*)

Q: May Bahá'ís volunteer to fight in the military?

“...there is no objection to a Bahá'í enlisting voluntarily in the armed forces of a country in order to obtain a training in some trade or professions, provided that he can do so without making himself liable to undertake combatant service.” (*From a letter of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Fiji Islands, August 2, 1971*)

“There is likewise no objection to a Bahá'í seeking or continuing a career in the armed forces, provided that he can do so without making himself liable to undertake combatant service.” (*From a letter of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, January 13, 1981*)

At this time, the National Assembly is not aware of any branch of the United States Armed Forces which guarantees that the enlistee will not be assigned to combat.

“Bahá'ís cannot voluntarily enlist in any branch of the Armed Forces where they would be subject to orders to engage in the taking of human life.” (*From a letter of the Universal House of Justice to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Fiji Islands, August 2, 1971*)

“We think that Bahá'ís should be discouraged from seeking or continuing a career in the military, and that in any event they must, in obedience to the Guardian's clear instructions, apply for exemptions from military duty which necessitate the taking of human life.

“When the law imposes an obligation upon citizens to fulfill a term of military service, as the US Selective Service Act does, and a Bahá'í may fulfill this term by enlisting, re-enlisting or by being commissioned as an officer, he may do so provided he does not in any way jeopardize his right to ‘apply for and maintain the non-combatant status’ within the spirit of the above principle.” (*From a letter of the Universal House of Justice to a National Spiritual Assembly, September 20, 1965*)

Q: May Bahá'ís refuse to serve in the military?

The Bahá'í Teachings require that Bahá'ís obey the laws of the government under which they live. If required by law, Bahá'ís serve in the military and request, when available, non-combatant status.

The Guardian wrote to the National Spiritual Assembly of the British Isles on June 4, 1939, shortly before the outbreak of World War II:

“It is still his firm conviction that the believers, while expressing their readiness to unreservedly obey any directions that the authorities may issue concerning national service in time of war, should also, and while there is yet no outbreak of hostilities, appeal to the government for exemption from active military service in a combatant capacity, stressing the fact that they are doing so not prompted by any selfish considerations, but by the sole and supreme motive of upholding the Teachings of the Faith, which make it a moral obligation for them to desist from any act that would involve them into direct warfare with their fellow-humans of any other race or nation.

“The Bahá’í Teachings, indeed, condemn, emphatically and unequivocally, any form of physical violence, and warfare in the battlefield is obviously a form, and perhaps the worst form which such violence can assume.”

The Guardian explains our position further:

“Our position as Bahá’ís is not that we won’t obey our Government or support the country if attacked; it is that we do not believe in, or wish to take part in, killing our fellow-men. We are not conscientious objectors at all, we will serve, but wish, as there is a provision in the law of the United States covering our attitude, to be classified as non-combatants.” (*From a letter written on behalf of Shoghi Effendi to an individual, July 15, 1952*)

Shoghi Effendi outlines some possible forms of non-combatant work, then goes on to make the important point that Bahá’ís do not shirk danger:

“It is immaterial whether such services would still expose them to dangers, either at home or in the front, since their desire is not to protect their lives, but to desist from any acts of willful murder.

“The friends should consider it their conscientious duty, as loyal members of the Faith, to apply for such exemption, even though there may be slight prospect of their obtaining the consent and approval of the authorities to their petition. It is most essential that in times of such national excitement and emergency such as those through which so many countries in the world are now passing that the believers should not allow themselves to be carried away by the passions agitating the masses, and act in a manner that would make them deviate from the path of wisdom and moderation, and lead them to violate, however reluctantly and indirectly, the spirit as well as the letter of the Teachings.” (*From a letter written by the Guardian to the National Spiritual Assembly of the British Isles, June 4, 1939*)

Q: Should Bahá’ís criticize leaders of government?

“Forbear ye from concerning yourselves with the affairs of this world and all that pertaineth unto it, or from meddling with the activities of those who are its outward leaders. The one true God, exalted be His glory, hath bestowed the government of the earth upon the kings. To none is given the right to act in any manner that would run

counter to the considered views of them who are in authority.” (*Bahá'u'lláh, Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh, p. 241*)

“Loyalty (to the) World Order of Bahá'u'lláh, security of its basic institutions, both imperatively demand all its avowed supporters...(to) abstain individually and collectively, in word (and) action, informally as well as in all official utterances and publications, from assigning blame, taking sides, however indirectly, in recurring political crises now agitating (and) ultimately engulfing human society.” (*Shoghi Effendi, Directives from the Guardian, p. 56*)

“The Guardian wishes me to draw the attention of the friends through you that they should be very careful in their public utterances not to mention any political figures—either side with them or denounce them. This is the first fact to bear in mind. Otherwise they will involve the friends in political matters, which is infinitely dangerous for the Cause.” (*From a letter written on behalf of the Guardian to the National Spiritual Assembly of the United States and Canada, January 12, 1933*)

Q: Should Bahá'ís discuss current political events or attend marches and demonstrations that deal with the current world situation, such as those involving Iraq?

“In another Tablet He [Bahá'u'lláh] laid on His followers the obligation to ‘behave towards the government of the country in which they reside with loyalty, honesty and truthfulness.’ 'Abdu'l-Bahá reaffirmed the same principles. When in America He explained: ‘The essence of the Bahá'í spirit is that, in order to establish a better social order and economic condition, there must be allegiance to the laws and principles of government.’ And in a Tablet He referred to the ‘irrefutable command that the Blessed Perfection hath given’ in His Tablets, namely, ‘that the believers must obey the kings with the utmost sincerity and fidelity, and He hath forbidden them [the believers] to interfere at all with political problems. He hath even prohibited the believers from discussing political affairs.’ ” (*From a letter of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, December 8, 1967*)

“In view of the necessity of the Bahá'í community to relate to governments...a correct understanding of what is legitimate Bahá'í action in the face of the policy of non-interference with government affairs is bound to be difficult to achieve on the part of individual friends...it is important that decisions as to the conduct of such relationships be made by authorized institutions of the Faith and not by individuals. In matters of this kind, given the utter complexity of human affairs with which the Bahá'í community must increasingly cope both spiritually and practically, individual judgment is not sufficient...The friends must learn to appreciate this new situation, to acquiesce to the prerogative of their elected institutions to decide on questions involving or affecting relations with their governments, and evince confidence in the incontrovertible promise of Bahá'u'lláh to protect His community.” (*From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, June 23, 1987*)

The current events surrounding Iraq and the United Nations involve actions and decisions of governments and, as such, are political and controversial in nature. It would be virtually impossible for any discussion of such volatile political issues to take place among the friends without their becoming embroiled in argument. Quite apart from the impression this could give to non-Bahá'ís that Bahá'ís are divided over controversial issues, the friends will find themselves taking opposing sides on these issues. Disunity, and even estrangement, would be the only results. And the real work of the Cause, the spiritual revitalization of the planet, could be impeded.

In this age of mass media, 24-hour TV news, and the rapid, worldwide dissemination of information over the Internet, it is crucially important for the Bahá'ís to distinguish between non-involvement in political and controversial matters, and “allow[ing] themselves to be drawn into the disputes of the many conflicting elements of the society around them...” (*From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, January 12, 2003*).

The friends should be aware, in this regard, that statements posted on the Internet are disseminated worldwide and instantaneously, and could be interpreted as Bahá'í positions on these events. As the Universal House of Justice has warned, “...an unwise act or statement by a Bahá'í in one country could result in a grave setback for the Faith there or elsewhere—and even the loss of the lives of fellow believers.” (*From a letter of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, December 8, 1967*)

With regard to marches and demonstrations, the National Spiritual Assembly's Office of External Affairs wrote to a local Spiritual Assembly on January 3, 2003:

“Your Spiritual Assembly's sense that Bahá'ís should exercise extreme caution in any active involvement in demonstrations is correct. Although there is no prohibition against individual Bahá'ís joining in marches and demonstrations as long as they are legal, nonviolent, and politically nonpartisan, one would hope that individuals would be guided by their Bahá'í principles when considering the implications of their participation in this type of activity. In the case that you mention in your letter, the overarching principle is that the Bahá'í Faith does not take sides in conflicts between countries, and participating in a march or demonstration for or against military action in another country presupposes taking sides.”

Q. What about signing petitions or writing letters to the president, even if no one knows I am a Bahá'í?

The Guardian writes in a letter to an individual dated March 19, 1946:

“The Bahá'ís should refrain from signing petitions designed to bring pressure on the Government which may have any political character whatsoever. There are so many other people who can carry on progressive types of activity, but only the Bahá'ís can do the work of Bahá'u'lláh.” (*The Unfolding Destiny of the British Bahá'í Community, p. 444*)

Q: What can we do?

Shoghi Effendi explained that the Lesser Peace “will initially be a political unity arrived at by the decision of the governments of various nations; it will not be established by direct action of the Bahá’í community.” We know, however, that a true and lasting peace is much more than an end to war, and will not be achieved by political work alone. Bahá’u’lláh declared:

“The well-being of mankind, its peace and security, are unattainable unless and until its unity is firmly established. This unity can never be achieved so long as the counsels which the Pen of the Most High hath revealed are suffered to pass unheeded.”
(Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, p. 286)

As the old world order inevitably disintegrates around us, we alone can and must begin the simultaneous and all-important task of integration, of building the new World Order.

“Indeed, by promoting the principles of the Faith, which are indispensable to the maintenance of peace, and by fashioning the instruments of the Bahá’í Administrative Order, which we are told by the beloved Guardian is the pattern for future society, the Bahá’ís are constantly engaged in laying the groundwork for a permanent peace, the Most Great Peace being their ultimate goal.” *(From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, January 31, 1985)*

Our complete aloofness from political matters and controversial issues, however, does not imply that Bahá’ís are uncaring, or oblivious to the suffering we see around us. On the contrary, we are to be “anxiously concerned with the needs of the age” in which we live. Shoghi Effendi encourages us to associate with other groups working towards aims and principles shared by the Bahá’í community. The Universal House of Justice explained in its 1996 Ridván Message that “our community has a responsibility to lend spiritual impetus to the processes towards” the Lesser Peace, and that the external affairs work of the Bahá’í community on the local, national, and international levels is thus “aimed at influencing the processes towards world peace,” by “collaborat[ing] directly with the forces leading towards the establishment of order in the world.” Addressing the critical distinction between this type of activity and involvement in controversial matters, the Universal House of Justice recently wrote:

“The aim of the Bahá’ís is to reconcile viewpoints, to heal divisions, and to bring about tolerance and mutual respect among men, and this aim is undermined if we allow ourselves to be swept along by the ephemeral passions of others. This does not mean that Bahá’ís cannot collaborate with any non-Bahá’í movement; it does mean that good judgment is required to distinguish those activities and associations which are beneficial and constructive from those which are divisive.” *(From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, January 12, 2003)*

Ultimately, Bahá’ís know that only the Divine System brought by Bahá’u’lláh can rid the world of the evils that lie at the core of its afflictions, allowing mankind to attain unto the Most Great Peace.

“The fundamental purpose of our Faith is unity and the establishment of Peace. This goal, which is the longing of people throughout an increasingly insecure world, can only be achieved through the Teachings of Bahá’u’lláh. Since it is only the Bahá’ís who can give these Teachings to mankind, the friends must weigh carefully how they will spend their time and energy and guard against associating with activities which unduly distract them from their primary responsibility of sharing the Message of Bahá’u’lláh.” *(From a letter written on behalf of the Universal House of Justice to an individual, July 4, 1982)*

We should not forget, therefore, that it is our distinct blessing as Bahá’ís to receive the constant, loving and infallible guidance of the Universal House of Justice. As the disintegration of the old world order accelerates, we must turn our attention all the more to the activities which the Supreme Body assures us will lead to the eventual triumph of this Cause and lasting peace for all of humankind. Our attention to the goals set by the National Spiritual Assembly, our participation in study circles, devotional gatherings and children’s classes, are by no means peripheral activities in a world troubled by more urgent concerns. Rather, it is through this very work that we may offer to society the only true solution to its ills.

“It is evident...that a systematic approach to training has created a way for Bahá’ís to reach out to the surrounding society, share Bahá’u’lláh’s message with friends, family, neighbors and co-workers, and expose them to the richness of His teachings. This outward-looking orientation is one of the finest fruits of the grassroots learning taking place.” *(From a letter of the Universal House of Justice, January 17, 2003)*

Let us take inspiration, then, from the following words of Shoghi Effendi, as relevant today as they were when addressed to the American Bahá’í community of more than a half-century ago:

“As the international situation worsens, as the fortunes of mankind sink to a still lower ebb, the momentum of the Plan must be further accelerated, and the concerted exertions of the community responsible for its execution rise to still higher levels of consecration and heroism. As the fabric of present-day society heaves and cracks under the strain and stress of portentous events and calamities, as the fissures, accentuating the cleavage separating nation from nation, class from class, race from race, and creed from creed, multiply, the prosecutors of the Plan must evince a still greater cohesion in their spiritual lives and administrative activities, and demonstrate a higher standard of concerted effort, of mutual assistance, and of harmonious development in their collective enterprises.” *(Shoghi Effendi, Citadel of Faith, p. 43)*