

MEMORANDUM

To: The Universal House of Justice

Date: 3 February 2016

From: Research Department

Early Bahá'í Census

It has been brought to the attention of the Research Department that statements have been made on Internet discussion sites claiming that ... had found a census of the Bahá'ís in Iran in the course of research done in the Bahá'í World Centre Archives. This census is alleged to have been conducted by the Greatest Holy Leaf around the time of the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and to have shown that there were one million Bahá'ís in that country at the time. The Research Department has studied this issue and offers the following response.

We have found no evidence of a census of the Bahá'ís in Iran having been requested or carried out by the Greatest Holy Leaf around the time of the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. However, very early in his ministry, Shoghi Effendi made the taking of a reliable census a feature of the rise of the Administrative Order throughout the world. A few months after the passing of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, he asked the Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Tīhrán to appoint a committee that would correspond with Bahá'í centres throughout the country in order to determine the number of believers in each locality.

Similar instructions were sent to other Spiritual Assemblies around the same time. In a letter dated 12 March 1923 to the Bahá'ís of America, Great Britain, Germany, France, Switzerland, Italy, Japan and Australasia¹, Shoghi Effendi discussed at length the purposes and functions of the National Spiritual Assembly. He provided, in an enclosure, a list of the number of delegates assigned to various Bahá'í localities in America as an illustration of the principles governing the election of delegates and stated that the numbers, which had been compiled a year previously, should be readjusted before the next annual Convention based on a revised and up-to-date census.

Letters written over subsequent years followed the progress of the census and emphasized that the preparation of an accurate and complete census was one of the prerequisites of the establishment of the National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of Iran. Shoghi Effendi continued to remind and encourage the friends in Iran to carry out the census, until the National Assembly was finally elected in 1934.

Among the holdings of the Archives at the World Centre are a series of papers relating to censuses that were undertaken during that period. These documents indicate that there were several tens of thousands of Bahá'ís registered in Iran's formal statistics in the 1920s and early 1930s, although a note, dated 19 Diy 1310 [10 January 1932], states that, because of the lack of means, the census does not include all the Bahá'ís in Iran but only those that the various administrative divisions have been able to register. The next readily available figure for

¹ *Bahá'í Administration: Selected Messages, 1922–1932* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974, 1998 printing), pp. 34–43.

registered Bahá'ís in Iran is the estimated number of 300,000 which was obtained in the late 1970s.

The much larger numbers claimed in the early days of the Faith by certain orientalist, diplomats, and even Bahá'ís themselves may be attributed to the fervour created among the populace by the teachings of the new Manifestation. Lord Curzon, for example, wrote in 1892 that “the lowest estimate places the present number of Babis in Persia at half a million,” but that he is disposed to think, “from conversations with persons well qualified to judge, that the total is nearer one million.”²

In reality, it is impossible to state precisely how many among the population of Iran were ready to be formally recognized as Bahá'ís in the very early days of the Faith; in any case, believers were not registered at that time and no systematic census was taken before the ones carried out at the Guardian's instruction.

² George N. Curzon, *Persia and the Persian Question* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1892), vol. 1, p. 499.