

THE WORLD OF THE BAHÁ'Í FAITH

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‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ ‘ABBÁS¹

Necati Alkan

‘Abdu’l-Bahá (i.e., the ‘Servant of Bahá’) was the eldest son of Bahá’u’lláh (1817–1892), the founder of the Bahá’í Faith, and His appointed successor and the Head of the Faith from 1892 to 1921. He was named ‘Abbás after His grandfather, the minister Mírzá Buzurg Núrí (from Núr) and officially called ‘Abbás Effendi. His mother was Ásíyyih Khánum, ‘Navváb’, who was also from a notable family. Bahá’u’lláh became a prominent member of the Bábí Faith. From early in His life, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá shared His father’s hardships caused by the persecution of the Bábís in Iran and, later, during their exiles from Tehran to Baghdad, Istanbul, Edirne, and ‘Akká. He was Bahá’u’lláh’s close companion, chief steward, and trusted representative for external affairs in the Ottoman Empire. For the Bahá’ís, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is ‘the Master’, as called by His Father, and the perfect exemplar of the Bahá’í teachings.

Birth and childhood in Iran, 1844–1853

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s birth was on the same night on which the Báb declared His prophetic mission. He was born around midnight on 5 Jumáda al-Awwal 1260 (22–23 May 1844) in Tehran: ‘He it was Whose auspicious birth occurred on that never-to-be-forgotten night when the Báb laid bare the transcendental character of His Mission to His first disciple Mullá Ḥusayn’ (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 240; see also Esslemont 1923/1980: 51). The family of His father was from the province of Mazandaran, and later, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá would specify and extol His ancestral homeland in the following words:

Although ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was born in Ṭihrán and for successive years wandered homeless in Iraq, and although he was for a time an exile in Rumelia and for forty years a prisoner in ‘Akká, yet his homeland is Mázindarán—that is to say, the district of Míyánrúd in the region of Núr. . . . it is the ancestral home of the family of the Blessed Beauty. My heart longeth for that land to become even as Paradise itself²

(Muntakhabátí 4: no. 3; Light of the World, no. 11)

From His early childhood, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá sensed the greatness in Bahá’u’lláh’s personality and His attachment to the mission of Báb, owing to which He was persecuted like thousands of other Bábís. This was due to the false accusation that Bahá’u’lláh ordered three Bábís to

assassinate Násiru’d-Dín Sháh in August 1852. The attempt failed, but the shah was outraged and ordered Bahá’u’lláh arrested, even though He was the son of a minister. He was thrown into the terrible dungeon of the Siyáh-Chál in Tehran (Balyuzi 1980: 79–83). Consequently, the family’s belongings were pillaged, their lands confiscated overnight, and the family suffered poverty and hunger. This occurred when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was an eight-year-old boy. According to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s own testimony:

The Blessed Beauty, may my life be a sacrifice for His loved ones, did not raise us to live a life of comfort—to repose in ease, or make merry, or indulge in pleasures. He spent His days in prison; He raised us to be intoxicated with the wine of disappointment, and trained us to endure every hardship, so that the genuine intention to serve the Cause of God would be mixed into our characters. Thereby would we make sacrifices without even willing it and eschew even a moment’s peace.

(Muntakhabátí 5: nos. 1–2)

‘Abdu’l-Bahá also confirms that as much as He grew up with hardships, His life was infused with servitude to the Báb, and as a result, He was honoured with servitude in the embrace of Bahá’u’lláh (ibid., no. 192).

The most remarkable event in His childhood, as told by Himself, was when a servant took Him to the Siyáh-Chál to visit His father. He was heartbroken to see Him in such a terrible condition: ‘Suddenly they brought the Blessed Perfection [Bahá’u’lláh] out of the dungeon. He was chained to several others. What a chain! It was very heavy. The prisoners could only move it along with great difficulty. Sad and heart-rendering it was’ (quoted in Balyuzi 1971: 11).

After four dreadful months in the dungeon, Bahá’u’lláh was proven innocent and released, but he had to leave Iran. He, His family, and some followers were banished in early 1853 to Baghdad in the Ottoman Empire. Sixty years later, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá stated that the fact that He had been victim of tuberculosis in childhood was a blessing in disguise because He had to stay in Tehran for treatment. Otherwise, He would have been in Mazandaran and could not have joined His father, to Whom He was very much attached, in the exile (Balyuzi 1971: 12–13).

Exile in Ottoman Baghdad, 1853–1863

After a difficult journey in the midst of a harsh winter, which affected the young ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to such an extent that He suffered from the pain caused by the resulting frostbite all His life, Bahá’u’lláh and His entourage reached Baghdad on 8 April 1853. Despite His first revelation in the Siyáh-Chál, where He received the intimation that He was the promised redeemer Whom the Báb and all the holy scriptures had foretold, Bahá’u’lláh did not disclose His station until ten years later. But even as a child, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was aware of His father’s station and was the first one to believe in His mission:

In Baghdad I was a child nine years old. There and then he [Bahá’u’lláh] announced to me the Word, and I believed him. As soon as he proclaimed to me the Word, I threw myself at his holy feet and implored and supplicated him to accept this one drop of blood as a sacrifice in his pathway.

(Diary of Mirza Ahmad Sohrab January 13, 1914; Star of the West, 8.13: 169; Esslemont 1923/1980: 52)

Other accounts relate that it was in April 1863, before Bahá’u’lláh left Baghdad, when He confided to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá that He was the Promised One (see later in this chapter).

Bahá'u'lláh's aim in Baghdad was to revitalise the devastated Bábí community, which had become disheartened after the Báb's execution in 1850 and the massacre of His followers after the assassination attempt on the shah. Yet the plotting of enemies from within, foremost the attacks by His half-brother Mírzá Yaḥyá—known as the 'nominee' of the Báb, who did not fulfil his role as the leader of the Bábís and was constantly in hiding—made Bahá'u'lláh avoid assertions of leadership. Instead, Bahá'u'lláh left His home in 1854, without notifying His family, and retreated to the mountains of the Kurdish region of northern Iraq near Sulaymaniyah.

As saddened as He was over this separation, the ten-year-old 'Abdu'l-Bahá displayed a mature character, was serene, and bore responsibilities for the Bábí community and His family. In addition, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was known for His intellectual capacities and wisdom at that young age despite the fact that He did not attend a formal school; His mind had been moulded under the care of Bahá'u'lláh. In His teens 'Abdu'l-Bahá had contact with many men of learning in Baghdad who came to ask for His advice or put forward philosophical questions and listen to the replies of this young yet sagacious youth.

Bahá'u'lláh's absence had proved that the Bábí community was in need of Him, and after He came back to Baghdad in 1856, He invigorated the followers of the Báb and turned their attention to the unique presence of 'Abdu'l-Bahá:

Bahá'u'lláh gave the Bábís vision and hope and character which they had lost. But as yet only the chosen mind of 'Abdu'l-Bahá had received the full impact of the station of His Father. It was during this period that Bahá'u'lláh bestowed upon His Son the designation 'Sirru'lláh'—the Mystery of God. Those who sought the presence of Bahá'u'lláh found in His eldest Son traits and qualities which evoked high praise and marvelling admiration.

(Balyuzi 1971: 15)

Although officially a prisoner of the Ottoman Empire, Bahá'u'lláh could walk freely in Baghdad and mingled with the people. 'Abdu'l-Bahá became His father's shield and representative with regard to relations with Ottoman officials and society in general. He also became His secretary, transcribing writings of Bahá'u'lláh, foremost the Kitáb-i-Íqán ('The Book of Certitude'), His principal work of apologetics and the first Bahá'í book ever printed (Browne and Momen 1987, *Selections* 250; Buck 1995/2012, *Symbol & Secret* 113).

During most of this ten-year period in Baghdad, Sultan Abdülmecid ('Abdu'l-Majíd, reigned 1839–1861) was rather friendly towards the exiled Bábís. The friendly attitude of the Sublime Porte (the Ottoman government) towards Bahá'u'lláh changed after Abdülaziz ('Abdu'l-'Azíz), brother of Abdülmecid, became the Sultan (1861–1876). Iran, noting with alarm the recovery of the Bábí community under Bahá'u'lláh's guidance, pressed Istanbul to have him removed from Baghdad. The Iranian ambassador Ḥusayn Khán 'Mushíru'd-Dawlah' in Istanbul increasingly agitated for this end ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *Makátib* 2: 177). Eventually, the Ottomans gave in and ordered Bahá'u'lláh to Istanbul. Shortly before the official edict was given to Bahá'u'lláh, the governor general of Baghdad, Namık (Námiq) Pasha (1804–1892) gave the Bábís Ottoman citizenship, much to the irritation of the Iranian government. In this way the Bábís, whom Bahá'u'lláh had kept under His leadership, were protected when the Iranian authorities asked to extradite them back to Iran (Alkan 2008: 62).

Before Bahá'u'lláh and His entourage left Baghdad for Istanbul, He retreated for twelve days, from 22 April to 3 May, to the garden that belonged to Necib (Najíb) Pasha, which was later known as the 'Garden of Riḍván'. There Bahá'u'lláh proclaimed His divine mission and claim to 'Abdu'l-Bahá and a few Bábís in His entourage (Phelps 1903: 30; Blomfield 1940: 82).

In a tablet that 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote at the Garden of Riḍván when He was about nineteen years old, just before the exile to Istanbul, He related that Namık Pasha apologised for the development of the whole affair and offered to help Bahá'u'lláh in any way he could (*Muntakhabát* 4: no. 35). Bahá'u'lláh received so much attention and esteem from high and low alike that His enemies, who had secured His banishment, now regretted their scheme.

Later in His life, 'Abdu'l-Bahá related that, owing to the hostility of Nāṣiri'd-Dín Sháh and Sultan Abdülaziz and his viziers, Mehmed Emin (Âli) Pasha (d. 1871) and Mehmed Fuad Pasha (d. 1869; both exchanged the posts of Prime and Foreign Minister for decades), Bahá'u'lláh was exiled from Baghdad in order to end His influence. But they did not realize that the exile actually added to the glory of His religion because Bahá'u'lláh spent twelve days in the Garden of Riḍván with great joy and left it with magnificence (*Risálih-i-Ayyám-i-Tis 'ih* 328–329).

'Abdu'l-Bahá had made arrangements to make the difficult journey to Istanbul across Iraq and modern Turkey as easy as possible. It lasted three months. Later in Istanbul and Edirne, His role as His father's chief shield and representative became even more prominent.

Banishment in Istanbul and Edirne, 1863–1868

Arriving in the Ottoman capital on 16 August 1863, Bahá'u'lláh was approached by Ottoman officials, who paid their respect to Him but also advised Him that it was customary to pay one's respects to the Prime Minister and, eventually, to Sultan Abdülaziz. Since Bahá'u'lláh had been invited by the Ottoman government, He had no favour to solicit or gain. He observed that 'nothing has been seen from its [Istanbul's] inhabitants but conventional, officious formalities' (Mazandarani 1968: 1.108–109; Rosen 1908: 126 no. 37, transl. Cole n.d.). Regarding the statesmen in Istanbul, He stated that they were not mature: 'its governors and elders [were] as children gathered about and disporting themselves with clay' (*Summons* 201). 'Abdu'l-Bahá confirmed this observation. He is reported to have said that the thoughts of the statesmen of the East were atrophied, their hearts devoid of desire for the progress of the nation, their ideas petty, selfish, local, and not general. They thought of their own interests rather than of those of their country (Sohrab 1929: 237–238).

At some point during the four-month stay in Istanbul, the Iranian ambassador, Ḥusayn Khán, convinced the Ottomans to exile Bahá'u'lláh to Edirne in Rumelia (European Turkey), at the western fringes of the Empire. At the end of 1863, Bahá'u'lláh and His entourage were banished 'suddenly and without any justification whatsoever, in the depth of winter, and in the most humiliating circumstances' to Edirne (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 158). 'Abdu'l-Bahá later stated that 'the Government obliged us to settle in Adrianople [Edirne]' (*Memorials* 58).

During the almost five years in Edirne, which Bahá'u'lláh called 'the Land of Mystery' (*Arḍ-i-Sirr*), 'Abdu'l-Bahá's station became even more important. Bahá'u'lláh had already conferred upon His illustrious son the title 'the Mystery of God', and now in Edirne, He called Him 'the Most Mighty Branch' (*Ghuṣn-i-A'zam*; *ghuṣn* being a designation for Bahá'u'lláh's male descendants; the family was called *Aghṣán*, 'branches'). In a most significant tablet called the *Súrih-i-Ghuṣn*, 'the Surah of the Branch', Bahá'u'lláh elevated the rank of 'Abdu'l-Bahá among His sons and alluded that He would be His successor. In unequivocal language, Bahá'u'lláh described 'Abdu'l-Bahá's exalted station as the one to whom all the Bahá'ís must turn. Only under His shadow would they be safe; a safety of which those who turned away from Him were deprived (Balyuzi 1971: 22–23)

It was in Edirne that 'Abdu'l-Bahá, now in His twenties, composed His commentary on the Islamic hadith, beginning with 'I was a hidden treasure' (*Kuntu kanzan makḥfiyyan*), at the request of Ali Şevket ('Alí Sháhkat) Pasha, an Ottoman official and, apparently, a Sufi

(Esslemont 1923/1980: 52–53; Momen 1995: 4). Shoghi Effendi refers to it as a ‘superb commentary on a well-known Muḥammadan tradition’ (*God Passes By* 241).³ ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had become widely known for His qualities and deep intellect. His contacts with Ottoman officials high and low made them His admirers. Among them was Mehmed Hurşid (Muḥammad Khurshíd) Pasha, the governor general of Edirne (1866–1869), who became His friend and consulted Him about the future of the Ottoman Empire (Sohrab 1929: 238–239).⁴ (Figure 6.1).

All His life, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá entertained friendly relations with followers of different religions and beliefs. In Edirne He was friends with Muslims and Christians (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 180) and, most interestingly, with some Bektashis⁵ (Sohrab 1929: 17–18, 218–219, 220), who are known in Turkey for being friendly with other religions, witty, and jestful.⁶

From the Edirne period until the exile to ‘Akká in August 1868, many significant events in the development of the Bábí community took place. Bahá’u’lláh commenced the proclamation of His claims on a global scale by writing to various secular and religious rulers (q.v. *Summons*). The conflict with His half-brother Mírzá Yaḥyá, which was already brewing in Baghdad, reached its climax. Bahá’u’lláh Himself calls this ultimate crisis as the ‘Days of Stress’ and the ‘most great separation’. After this, most of the Bábís followed Bahá’u’lláh and became known as ‘Bahá’ís.’ A tiny minority of the Bábís sided with Mírzá Yaḥyá (titled ‘Şubḥ-i-Azal’) and are known to history as ‘Azalis.’ After Bahá’u’lláh publicly proclaimed His mission in 1867 and expelled Mírzá Yaḥyá from the community, He withdrew from the public and made no public speeches (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Zarqani 1998: 127; *Star of the West* 19.7: 218–219). He also left the external affairs related to the family and community to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

The intrigues of Yaḥyá and his accomplices resulted in the decision of Sultan Abdülaziz to condemn Bahá’u’lláh and His followers to exile in the prison-city of ‘Akká in Syria (modern Israel). The Ottoman ruler did not spare the chief instigators, Yaḥyá and his lieutenant, Sayyid Muḥammad İşfahání, who has been called the ‘Antichrist of the Bahá’í Revelation’. They were sent to Famagusta in Cyprus and to ‘Akká, respectively. Both are traditional places of exile for Ottoman criminals and dissidents.

About three and a half years after the arrival in ‘Akká (see later in this chapter), ‘Abdu’l-Bahá sent a letter⁷ to the Ottoman Prime Minister (then Mahmud Nedim/Maḥmúd Nadím Pasha, Sept. 1871–July 1872; see Abu-Manneh 1990), describing the numerous banishments within the Ottoman Empire and the reasons for them. Regarding the deportation from Edirne, He wrote that despite the friendly attitude of the people in Edirne, one day, all of a sudden, soldiers surrounded the house of Bahá’u’lláh, and after the family inquired about the reason, they were told that it was decreed by the Sublime Porte that they be sent to Gelibolu (Gallipoli). Consternation seized the Bahá’í community after soldiers arrested Bahá’u’lláh and His followers, and they were forced to leave Edirne. Without understanding the reason, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá continued in His letter mentioned earlier, all the family and followers, counting seventy persons, were exiled to ‘Akká, where they were incarcerated in the military barracks (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 179–180 says ‘all the exiles, numbering about seventy’). Then, after one month, He was surprised to read in an Ottoman newspaper that the Ottoman Marshal of the *Police* Force received the Lion and Sun medal of the first class from the Iranian government (BOA, HR.TO. 455/55). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá further wrote in His letter that the edict commanding the exile to ‘Akká stated that He and Bahá’u’lláh were interrogated in Istanbul, and upon being found guilty, they were exiled. This, of course, was contrary to the truth because Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá were never present at the Sublime Porte for an interrogation (ibid.).

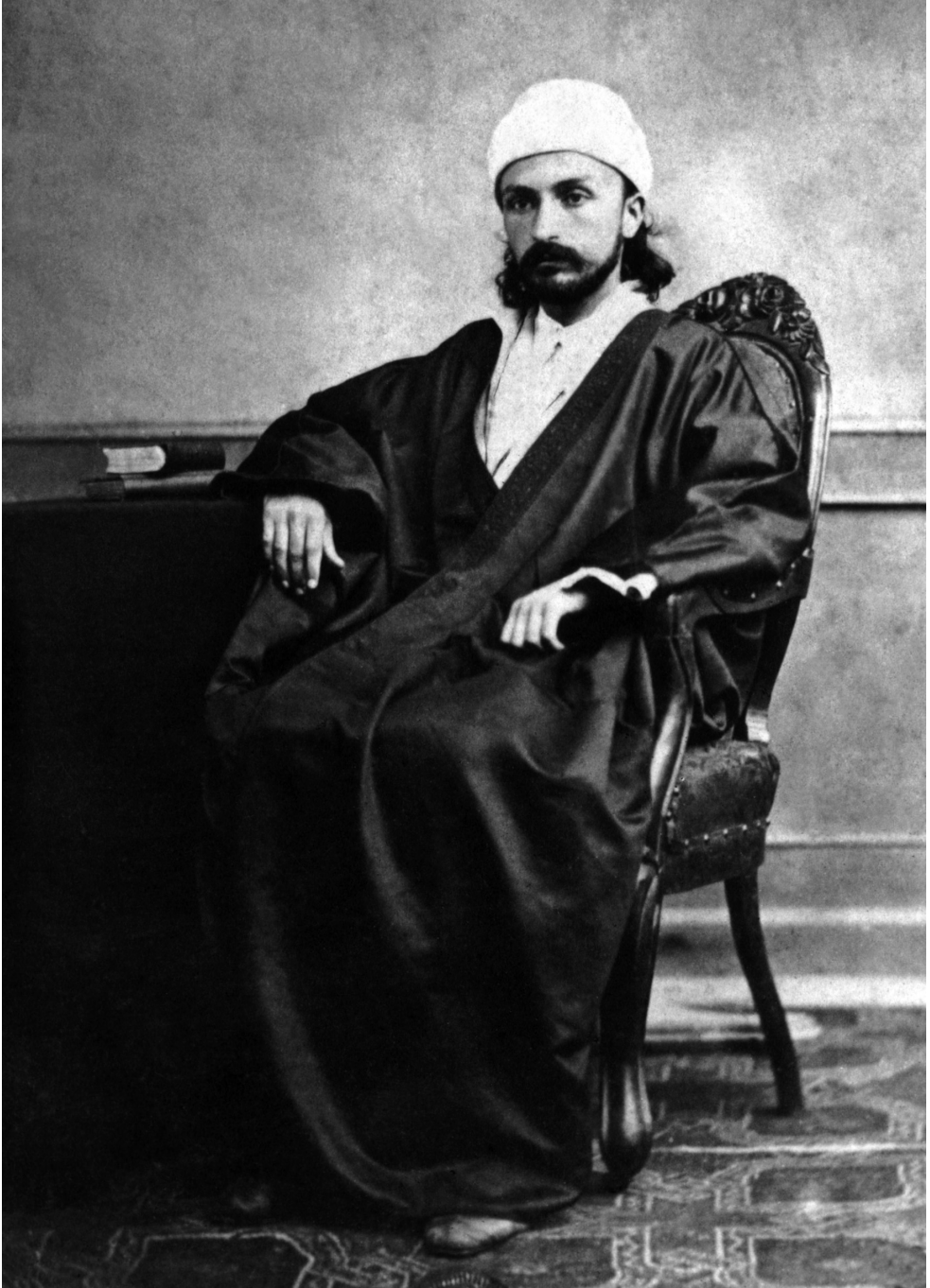


Figure 6.1 Photograph of 'Abdu'l-Bahá taken in 1868 (age 24).

Source: Bahá'í National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States.

Exile in ‘Akká, 1868–1892

The first years after their arrival in ‘Akká on 31 August 1868 proved especially difficult and dangerous for the Bahá’í community. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá continued to bear weighty responsibilities. He witnessed the death of His younger brother Mírzá Mihdí, titled ‘the Purest Branch’ (*Ghuṣn-i-Aṭhar*), in June 1870 at the age of twenty-two and the severe illness and suffering of many Bahá’ís, owing to the unsanitary condition of the military barracks of the citadel. Bahá’u’lláh referred to the citadel and the entire penal city of ‘Akká as ‘the Most Great Prison’, *Sijm-i-A’zam*. Later, Bahá’u’lláh would describe the role of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá with the following words:

[I]n the Most Great Prison We do not meet the people who are not within the fold of the Cause [the Bahá’í Faith]. We have closed the doors of social intercourse. It is the Master Who has taken every trouble upon Himself. For Our sake, in order that We may have ease and comfort, He faces the world and its peoples. For Us He has become a mighty stronghold, a mighty armour. . . . He, the Master, is the target and bears all hardships.

(Balyuzi 1971: 26; cf. Furútan 1986, n.d.: 76–77/39–40)

Bahá’u’lláh, His family, and His followers were released from the military barracks in ‘Akká towards the end 1870 but had to stay within the walls of the prison city. The condition in the citadel and later in the city of ‘Akká was so bad that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, in His letter mentioned earlier, informed the Ottoman Prime Minister about the conditions. Even in 1868, the Ottoman central government had taken notice of the wretched condition of the ‘Bábís’ in ‘Akká, and the Prime Minister (Áli Pasha) ordered the governor of Syria to investigate and improve their condition (BOA, HR. MKT. 636/61, 5 Şaban 1285/21 November 1868). However, this did not seem to have any effect. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá stated in His letter that for three and a half years they had been ‘in extreme wretchedness and abasement as prisoners in ‘Akká’ (*bi-dhillat-i-kubrá va haqárat-i-‘uzmá dar habs-i-‘Akká masjún va giriftár*), in spite of leaving Iran and arriving in the Ottoman Empire in ‘utmost might’ (*kamál-i-‘izzat*) and having been guests of the state. He asked how a person who was in full glory and arrived at the Ottoman capital by an imperial order could end up abandoned and walled up within the ruinous prison of ‘Akká with a daily allowance of four piasters (BOA, HR.TO. 455/55).

Notwithstanding the overall bad situation, the Bahá’í community in ‘Akká cheered when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá married Munírih Khánum in 1872. She was the daughter of a distinguished early Bábí in Iran. Out of their nine children, only four daughters survived to adulthood.

Especially noteworthy are ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s contacts with famous Ottoman reformer–statesmen, first with the group called the ‘Young Ottomans’ after the 1860s (Alkan 2008: 97–114). Among them were the poet and writer Namík Kemal (Námiq Kamál, 1840–1888) and Mídhāt (Mídhāt) Pasha (1822–1884), who was twice Prime Minister. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá hosted him in ‘Akká in May 1880 when he was on an inspection tour as governor of Syria. In June 1880 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá went to Beirut at the invitation of Mídhāt Pasha (Alkan 2005). This and similar meetings ‘served to enhance immensely the growing prestige of the community and spread abroad the fame of its most distinguished member’ (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 193).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá was also in contact with the second generation of reformers called the ‘Young Turks’, who caused the revolution in 1908 that eventually deposed Sultan Abdülhamid II (r. 1876–1909) (Alkan 2004: 253–274; idem 2008: 57–141). It is important to highlight ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s excellent Turkish, which was attested to by Ottoman literati (Alkan 2005: 10; idem 2008: 112–113), as He spent most of His life in the Ottoman Empire and was in contact with

countless people of high and low official ranks with whom He exchanged letters on mundane and philosophical, religious, and political matters⁸ (Alkan 2011: 259–278). He also wrote tablets, prayers, and poems to Turkish-speaking Bahá’ís, mostly in Iranian Azerbaijan and the Caucasus (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Majmú‘ih*; see also Alkan 2001, 2003).

Instructed by Bahá’u’lláh (*Safínihi-yi-‘Irfán* 6: 10; Masumian 2021b), in 1875 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá composed His ‘Secret of Divine Civilization’ (Risálih-i-Madaniyyih; Momen 1983; McGlinn 2009/2020; Scharbrodt 2008, 2017), in which He deplored the backwardness of Iran; proposed reforms in all spheres of the state; and affirmed the need for a parliament, for ethical/secular education, and for the employment of able statesmen to ensure just rule. Shoghi Effendi called this treatise “‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s outstanding contribution to the future reorganization of the world’ (*World Order* 37). The fact that it was the second printed Bahá’í book in 1882 (Bombay) illustrates its importance. ‘It was distributed anonymously and is said to have achieved a wide readership among the Iranian intelligentsia, particularly after its printing in 1882. But later when its authorship became known, no one would admit to having read it’ (Momen 1983: 49).

Later (early 1890s), ‘Abdu’l-Bahá repeated similar issues pertaining to Iran and the Ottoman Empire in the Risálih-i-Siyásiyyih (“Treatise on Politics”), where He emphasized that man-made laws are not enough to enable human progress and that divine law or religion is indispensable to educate the people. He added that the interference of religious leaders in political affairs is dangerous (Alkan 2011: 261). This treatise was presented to Náşiru’d-Dín Shah and distributed among the notables of Iran (Balyuzi 1985: 176).

Bahá’u’lláh was allowed to live outside the prison-city of ‘Akká for the last fifteen years of his life because ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s friendly relations with Ottoman officials—like Midhat Pasha and Aziz Pasha, both of whom were governors of Syria—raised the prestige of the Bahá’ís in Ottoman Palestine. This opened the gates of the citadel for Bahá’u’lláh after nine years of incarceration (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 241).

Head of the Bahá’í Faith, 1892–1921

On 29 May 1892 Bahá’u’lláh passed away, still a prisoner of the Ottoman Empire. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá cabled the news to Sultan Abdülhamid II in a telegram that said, ‘The Sun of Bahá has set’. The sultan consented to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s intention to inter Bahá’u’lláh’s remains next to the mansion of Bahjí near ‘Akká, where He had lived (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 222).

Bahá’u’lláh’s numerous oral and written statements about the station of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as His successor, the ‘Centre of the Covenant’ (*markaz-i-‘ahd*), and the authorised interpreter of His writings made it quite clear to the Bahá’ís that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was the new Head of the Faith. However, Mírzá Muḥammad-‘Alí, a younger half-brother of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, was discontented over the latter’s designation as the successor of Bahá’u’lláh and began to devise plans to discredit Him by making Him appear to be the cause of mischief and rebellion in Ottoman Syria. Mírzá Muḥammad-‘Alí’s efforts caused trouble within the Bahá’í community, which was felt in Iran and other countries. As a result, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá declared him and his followers to be violators (termed ‘Covenant-breakers’) and told Bahá’ís to cease contact with them. This blocked their influence, and they never acquired a significant following among the Bahá’ís.

But Muḥammad-‘Alí and some of his relatives were successful in arousing the suspicions of the Ottoman authorities. They informed the government that the mausoleum of the Báb being built on Mount Carmel in Haifa was actually being constructed to serve as a fortress and weapons depot in a rebellion against the sultan. They accused ‘Abdu’l-Bahá of having already hoisted the banner of *Yá Bahá’u’l-Abhá*—an invocation among Bahá’ís, meaning ‘O glory of the all-glorious’—as the ensign of revolt, even in distant places in Palestine and Syria, and of having

secretly raised an army of some thousand men (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 264–65; Balyuzi 1971: 95–96; Alkan 2008: 158). While these communications between Muḥammad-‘Alí and the Ottoman administration have not been found to date, the Ottomans took notice of the ‘unlawful actions’ of “Abbás Effendi and his brothers’ (BOA, DH.MKT. 2207/72, 21 Muharrem 1317/1 June 1899). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refuted these accusations and referred to His half-brother as the ‘centre of violation/sedition’ (*markaz-i-naqd*) (*Muntaḥhabátí* 1: 212; *Selections* 217–218).

On 20 August 1901, a cipher telegram came from Istanbul, conveying Abdülhamid II’s orders to imprison ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and other family members. Muḥammad-‘Alí was also sent to prison. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was interrogated for several days at the headquarters of the government in ‘Akká. He interceded for his arrested family members, including Muḥammad-‘Alí, and as a result, all were released and allowed to live in ‘Akká. Despite this, Muḥammad-‘Alí and his followers continued with their efforts. They bribed officials with gifts. The Ottomans sent agents to ‘Akká from Istanbul to keep a watch on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Muḥammad-‘Alí’s associates appealed to the governor of Damascus, the mufti of Beirut, the Protestant missionaries in ‘Akká and Syria, and even to Shaykh Abu’l-Hudá (Balyuzi 1971: 95–96; Abu-Manneh 1979), the powerful advisor of Sultan Abdülhamid. All this was intended to bring about either ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s execution or his removal to a far-off place (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 264–65).

According to Bahá’í sources, as a result of Muḥammad-‘Alí’s efforts, a Commission of Inquiry was dispatched from Istanbul to ‘Akká to investigate ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Bahá’í sources usually speak of two commissions, the first sent in 1904 and the second in 1907, just after an assassination attempt on Sultan Abdülhamid II (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *‘Abdu’l-Bahá in London* 117–19; *God Passes By* 266; Balyuzi 1971; Afrukhteh 2003: 457, 468–471). However, other internal and external (Ottoman) evidence confirms that it could only have been one commission in 1905, just before the assassination attempt, which actually took place on 21 July that year (Alloul et al. 2018; Alkan 2008: 161–166). In any case, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was subjected to frequent interrogations by the Commission to answer the severe accusations by Muḥammad-‘Alí. Among the charges was that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had bought tracts of land to establish his own kingdom. He rebuffed this by asking how it was possible for a prisoner of the Ottoman Empire to do this. Even though Muḥammad-‘Alí’s attacks initially threatened ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and caused a bad reputation for the Bahá’í Faith, they ultimately failed.

In spite of the constant stress cause by the Covenant-breakers, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s leadership produced great successes for the Bahá’í Faith. The Bahá’í teachings spread to the West, especially the United States, where the first conversions occurred in 1894. The Iranian community saw rapid growth. Through His ceaseless efforts and instructions, the Bahá’ís established consultative bodies, later called ‘Spiritual Assemblies’, thereby laying the foundation for the Bahá’í administration. In 1898–1899, American believers residing in Europe and the US arrived as the first Western Bahá’í pilgrims, visiting Bahá’u’lláh’s tomb and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. The Ottomans took notice and recorded it in detail (BOA, BEO 1358/101797, 20 August 1899).

In 1907 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá moved from ‘Akká to Haifa to oversee the construction of the Shrine of the Báb, despite the difficulties He faced from the Ottomans. At the same time, He guided the construction of the very first Bahá’í House of Worship in the world, in Ashqabad (Ashgabat, Turkmenistan). It was completed in 1908.

In August of that year, a month after the Young Turk Revolution, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was released by the Committee of Union and Progress from imprisonment as a result of the amnesty for political prisoners. Often in His talks, He praised the Young Turks for releasing Him and for their efforts to secure freedom. Since at least the late 1890s, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had quietly developed relations with reform-minded Ottoman officials, and they played a role in His release (Alkan 2011).

In March 1909 'Abdu'l-Bahá solemnly placed the remains of the Báb in its newly built Shrine, after which the Shrine became the second Bahá'í pilgrimage site (along with the resting place of Bahá'u'lláh outside 'Akká). 'Abdu'l-Bahá's house in Haifa became the administrative centre of the Bahá'í Faith.

With freedom and completion of the Shrine, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was now able to leave Palestine and travel to spread the Bahá'í Faith. Owing to His bad health, He first went to Alexandria in Egypt for a change of air. He stayed there a year, starting in August 1910, where He met many prominent officials and intellectuals, was interviewed by Egyptian newspapers, and strengthened the nascent Bahá'í community. Then in the summer of 1911, 'Abdu'l-Bahá travelled to Europe, visiting France, Switzerland, and England, where He gave public talks and interviews to the press. He spent the most time in Paris, where the first European Bahá'í community was already established. He returned to Egypt in December 1911 (Figure 6.2).

'Abdu'l-Bahá's next journey, from March 1912 until June 1913, was more far reaching; He travelled across the United States, visited Canada, then visited Europe, sojourning in England, Scotland, France, Germany, Austria, and Hungary, before finally returning to Egypt for several months.

'Abdu'l-Bahá was given remarkable receptions by the Iranian and Ottoman diplomatic officials in Washington, DC. H. Hohannes Topakyan, the consul general of Iran in New York, received Him in his home (Zarqani 1998: 128; *Star of the West*, 3.11: 8–9) and called Him 'the Beauty of God and the Glory of the East' (Zarqani 1998: 99; cf. *Star of the West*, 3.8: 13). The Ottoman ambassador, Yusuf Ziya (Yúsuf Dīyá) Pasha, honoured Him with a dinner, calling Him 'the Unique One of the age, who had come to spread His glory and perfection amongst us' (Thompson 1924: 16; cf. Zarqani 1998: 60). The reception at Yusuf Ziya's home was received positively by the American Bahá'ís, and about eight hundred of them signed a letter of gratitude to the Young Turk government in Istanbul for releasing 'Abdu'l-Bahá and allowing Him to travel (BOA, HR.SYS. 70/31, 1 July 1912; Alkan 2008: 171–173). Whereas Iran and the Ottoman Empire had persecuted the Bahá'ís in the early days, now they paid homage to 'Abdu'l-Bahá: 'both the Persian Legation and the Turkish Embassy . . . opened their doors to the one-time prisoner' (Gail 1991: 81).

In the United States 'Abdu'l-Bahá visited many cities, among which was Chicago, where He laid the cornerstone of the first House of Worship in the West. He delivered at least 401 public talks and held a similar number of private meetings with individuals and groups. He spoke in at least thirty-one white Protestant churches, fourteen Theosophical and New Thought meetings, three synagogues, and one African-American church; in seven settlement houses and other social service organizations; and at five universities. At least 358 newspaper articles resulted, reaching hundreds of thousands.

He proclaimed the Bahá'í teachings, such as the oneness of humanity, independent investigation of the truth, racial unity, equality of the sexes, and world peace. Often 'Abdu'l-Bahá stressed the principle of 'unity in diversity' and compared humanity to colourful flowers in one garden:

Diversity of hues, form and shape, enricheth and adorneth the garden, and heighteneth the effect thereof. In like manner, when divers shades of thought, temperament and character, are brought together under the power and influence of one central agency, the beauty and glory of human perfection will be revealed and made manifest. Naught but the celestial potency of the Word of God, which ruleth and transcendeth the realities of all things, is capable of harmonizing the divergent thoughts, sentiments, ideas, and convictions of the children of men.

(‘Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections* 291–292)

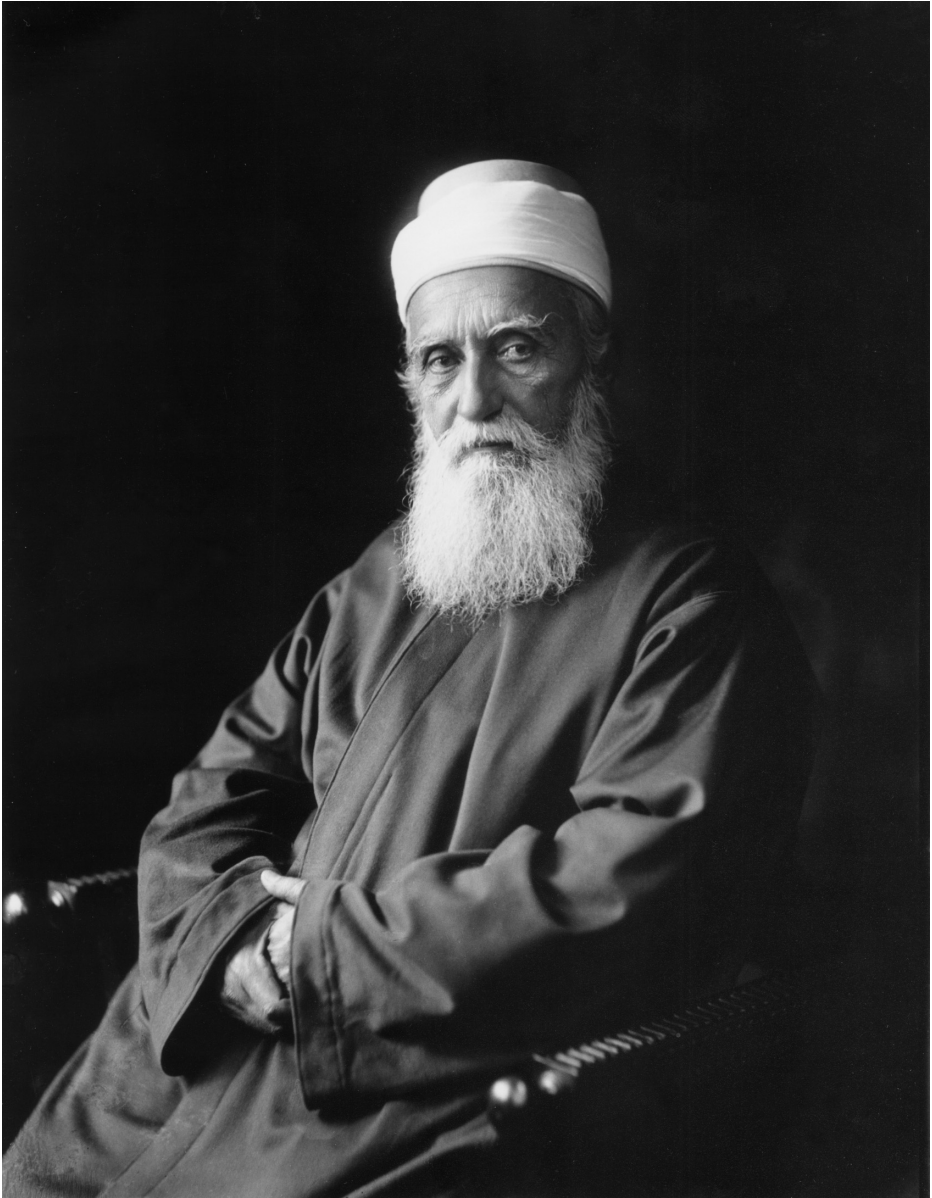


Figure 6.2 Photograph of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, 1912.

Source: National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States.

His call for women to acquire the right to vote made headlines. But perhaps His most enduring effort was subtly to encourage Louis Gregory, an African-American lawyer, and Louise Mathew, an English woman, to marry. Theirs was the first interracial marriage in the American Bahá'í community and became a constant reminder to the Bahá'ís of the true meaning of the oneness of humanity.

Both in North America and in Europe, 'Abdu'l-Bahá met many prominent individuals of all ranks, including leading African-American thinkers. The widespread publicity His travels received on both continents was crucial for the proclamation of Bahá'u'lláh's teachings, the spread of the Bahá'í Faith to new populations, and the establishment of administrative institutions. Moreover, he expounded on the application of the teachings to many contemporary problems and issues. One of those pressing issues was warfare, and 'Abdu'l-Bahá urged His audience and the general public to 'unlearn the science of war' (*Promulgation* 321). As much as His Father had warned the rulers of His time not to amass weapons and to work for world peace, 'Abdu'l-Bahá repeatedly stressed in 1912 that humanity was at the threshold of an 'impending war'. He likened Europe to 'a storehouse of explosives awaiting a spark' ('Abdu'l-Bahá, *ibid*, 451). 'What good did it do?' remarked an Ottoman religious leader (a certain Hassan Effendi in Istanbul), calling 'Abdu'l-Bahá 'the greatest living messenger of the East . . . who warned the world years before the beginning of the war of the great cataclysm toward which humanity was headed and who preached unity and oneness as the only salvation' (Mufty-Zade 1922: 243).⁹

Some months after 'Abdu'l-Bahá's return to Haifa in late 1913, World War I began. 'Abdu'l-Bahá encouraged a community of Bahá'ís He settled on land in the Jordan Valley to develop their agriculture and send Him their surplus. When famine loomed, 'Abdu'l-Bahá distributed the food among the needy people in Haifa. For this humanitarian act, the British government knighted Him in 1920.

During the war years, 'Abdu'l-Bahá wrote *The Tablets of the Divine Plan*, in which He entrusted the North American Bahá'ís with the mission to take the Bahá'í Faith to much of the world. It is one of His most important works and the 'charter' for the global expansion of the Faith. No less important is 'Abdu'l-Bahá's *Will and Testament*, another 'charter' of the Bahá'í Faith, in which He specified that His eldest grandson Shoghi Effendi (1897–1957) would succeed Him as Head of the Faith and stated the process necessary to elect the Universal House of Justice.

After the war ended, 'Abdu'l-Bahá further developed the framework of Bahá'í administration through His constant production of inspiring tablets and letters to Bahá'ís and Bahá'í communities all over the world. He also deepened the knowledge of veteran and new Bahá'ís who visited Him as pilgrims. A very important contribution towards the end of His life was His two tablets (1919 and 1920) addressed to the Central Organization for a Durable Peace at The Hague (Netherlands). There, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains how a number of teachings of Bahá'u'lláh relate to the attainment of universal peace (*Tablets to the Hague; Selections* nos. 227 and 228).¹⁰

After long years in exile and imprisonment and a toilsome but very fruitful life, 'Abdu'l-Bahá passed away on 28 November 1921, thus bringing to an end what Shoghi Effendi called the 'Apostolic' or 'Heroic' Age of the Bahá'í Faith. His funeral in Haifa, unprecedented in the region, was attended by thousands of mourners, representing every class, religion, and race. They included the British commissioner for Palestine, governors of its districts, and prominent religious leaders.

Abdu'l-Bahá was laid to rest in one of the chambers of the Shrine of the Báb on Mount Carmel. A century later, in 2021, the one hundredth anniversary of His passing, a Shrine, 'of a character befitting the unique station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá', was being constructed to 'forever embosom those sacred remains' (Figure 6.3).

(Bahá'í World News Service, May 7, 2019,
<https://news.bahai.org/story/1325/>)

From His birth, which coincided with the inception of the Bahá'í Faith, 'Abdu'l-Bahá devoted His life to furthering His Father's teachings, serving humanity, spreading the ideals of



Figure 6.3 Design of the Shrine of 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

Source: Bahá'í World News Service.

unity and justice, and devoting His energies to others, best expressed in His own words as 'Make me as dust in the pathway of Thy loved ones' (*Selections* 319–320). Shoghi Effendi described Him thus: 'in the person of 'Abdu'l-Bahá the incompatible characteristics of a human nature and superhuman knowledge and perfection have been blended and are completely harmonized'. He is the embodiment of the Bahá'í teachings par excellence, the 'Perfect Exemplar', and regarded as incarnating 'an institution for which we can find no parallel in any of the world's recognized religious systems' (Shoghi Effendi, *World Order* 134). While He has a unique station as 'Mystery of God', Perfect Exemplar, the 'Center of the Covenant', and 'Interpreter of the Word of God', 'Abdu'l-Bahá emphasized His 'complete self-effacement' and His 'utter nothingness' in relation to His Father, Bahá'u'lláh.

This chapter is dedicated to the loving memory of Ali Nakhjavani (1919–2019).

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Notes

- 1 I am indebted to friends for their contribution during the writing of this chapter. First and foremost, to Robert H. Stockman, the editor of this volume, for all his time in patiently waiting for my paper and making valuable suggestions. Adib Masumian, Farzin Vajdani and Fereyduun Vahman took time and skilfully translated some Persian sources or provided references. I owe special thanks to Ufuk Celme,

- who provided digital copies of documents from the Ottoman Archive in Istanbul (*Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi*, abbreviated as BOA in the text).
- 2 The reference to the 'garden/paradise of delight/bliss' is from the Qur'án, 26: 85, 56: 89 and 78: 38; it also occurs in the plural ('gardens') in several places, see *The Quranic Arabic Corpus*, <http://corpus.quran.com/qurandictionary.jsp?q=nEm> (accessed 12 April 2020).
 - 3 While official Bahá'í history mentions that He composed it at the instruction of Bahá'u'lláh and 'while still in His adolescence in Baghdád' (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 241), 'Abdu'l-Bahá (*Makátíb* 2: 55; Rafati 2012: 179) and Bahá'u'lláh (*Safinih-yi- 'Irfán* 6: 10; Masumian 2021a) confirm that it was composed in Edirne.
 - 4 See also the pilgrim notes at the US Bahá'í Archives at https://bahai-library.com/pdf/p/pilgrims_notes_us-archives_1919.pdf#page=72.
 - 5 Bektashis are followers of Hájí Bektash Veli (1209–1271), a mystic from Khorasan who settled in Anatolia and is the name giver of the unorthodox and non-conformist Sufi Order of Bektashism with pre-Islamic and Shi'í concepts.
 - 6 There are many Bektashi jokes told in Turkey, and even 'Abdu'l-Bahá mentions one: *Muntakhabátí*, 3:113; Masumian and Alkan 2021.
 - 7 Even though 'Abdu'l-Bahá's name or seal is not in this Persian letter at the Ottoman Archives in Istanbul (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Translation Bureau, classified as HR.TO 455/55 and dated 22 January 1872 on another sheet) and the name in the catalogue entry is wrongly given as 'the petition of 'Abdu'r-Rahmán 'Abbás who is an exile in 'Akká' and in the accompanying Ottoman Turkish translation as 'the Persian petition by someone named 'Abdu'r-Rájí 'Abbás who is an exile in 'Akká', the contents of the letter, as shown here, confirm that it must have been written by 'Abdu'l-Bahá. That His name was misread and it is a letter of 'Abdu'l-Bahá is further attested to by the fact that in another letter, He used the phrase '*abduhu ar-rájí*' ('His supplicating servant') on His seal; see Faizi 1972: 20; for a letter of 'Abdu'l-Bahá with the same seal, see Amanat and Vahman 2016: 150.
 - 8 These are at the Bahá'í World Centre in Haifa, Israel.
 - 9 Muftý-Zade Kazim Zia Bey recorded this after he returned to Istanbul with his American wife, Helen Cullen; he was the nephew of the aforementioned Ottoman ambassador Yusuf Ziya Pasha; see *Hamilton Evening Journal* (Hamilton, Ohio), 20 January 1923, p. 16.
 - 10 An Ottoman Turkish translation (with a foreword) by a certain M. H. Gulistani was published in the newspaper *İkdam* in November and December 1921, and January 1922.

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