

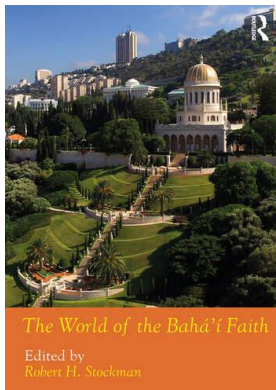
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The World of the Bahá'í Faith

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The Arab World

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THE ARAB WORLD

Nesreen Akhtarkhavari

The Arab world has played a crucial role in the development of the Bahá'í Faith and provides a unique window into the Faith's vitality in the face of serious challenges. It was the residence of the Bahá'í Faith's Prophet-Founder, Bahá'u'lláh, for over thirty-four of the forty years (1853–1892) of His ministry. It was in the Arab world where He publicly declared His Mission, where most of His sacred writings were written, and where He spent most of His Ministry.

It is difficult to condense the history of such an extended period and extensive region into a few pages, but since other chapters in the book cover the lives of the Faith's leading figures and include many major events that took place in the region, this chapter will focus on issues that are directly associated with the Arab world and some of the major events and cases that impacted the Faith's presence in the region. Because of limitations of space, only four national Bahá'í communities will be discussed. Their historical and legal developments are indications of the diversity of the experiences of the Bahá'ís in the Arab world.

Lineage and identity

The historical identity¹ of the Bahá'í Faith is rightfully linked to Persia, the homeland of the Báb and Bahá'u'lláh, and to the heroic sacrifices of Persian Bahá'ís and their role in the development and the expansion of the Faith. This, to a large degree, is intertwined with the connection of the Bahá'í Faith to the Arabs, its presence on Arab land, and the contribution of early Arab believers to its development and progress.

The first announcement of the coming of a new revelation was made by *Shaykh* Aḥmad-i-Aḥsá'í (d. 1826), the founder of the Shaykhi School, who was recognized by Bahá'u'lláh as 'the first of the "twin luminaries that heralded the advent of the Faith of the Báb"' (Aqdas n. 171). Aḥsá'í was an Arab from the tribe of Banú-*Ṣakhr* in the Arabian Peninsula, who later moved to Najaf and Karbala in Iraq. He was succeeded by Siyyid Kázim-i-Raṣḥtí (d. 1843), who, on his deathbed, called on his disciples to disperse and search for the Promised One. The Báb Himself spent a year (1255/1839–1840) in Iraq, mostly in Karbala, where He regularly attended the classes of Siyyid Kázim-i-Raṣḥtí. A number of Raṣḥtí's disciples became His followers, among them, Mullá Ḥusayn-i-Buṣhrú'í (d. 1849), the first to recognize the Báb (MacEoin 1989).

Further, the Báb was descended from Imam Husayn, the third Imam through both His father and His mother (Balyuzi 1973: 32). This places the Báb in direct line of descent from the

Prophet Muhammad and gives Him the title of ‘Siyyid’. The Báb confirms and celebrates His dual Arab and Persian identity by referring to Himself in some of His Writings as ‘this Arabian Youth’ (The Báb 1982, *Selections* 50).

The first official action the Báb undertook after declaring His mission was pilgrimage to Mecca, the heartland of Islam and the Arab world. There, He called upon the Sharif of Mecca to embrace the truth of the new revelation. The Sharif did not immediately read the letter the Báb delivered, but later indicated that he was impressed with its content and sympathized with this suffering descendent of the Prophet, who was subjected to persecution at the hands of the Persian clergy ([Zarandí] 1974: 130–133).

In Iraq, numerous prominent Arabs embraced the Bábí Faith and became devoted to its teachings through the effort and sacrifices of Mullá ‘Alíy-i-Bastámí, who was sent by the Báb to Iraq to share the news of His Revelation ([Zarandí] 1974: 87). His success was also in part due to the presence of Fáṭimih Baraghání, known as Ṭáhirih (d. 1852), who openly and boldly declared the Báb’s mission and taught His Faith. She also translated and expounded on the Báb’s writings; debated scholars on theological issues; and corresponded and met with local clergy, statesmen, and intellectuals, including Shaykh Maḥmúd-i-Álúsi (d. 1854), the Muftí of Baghdad, on whom she left a lasting impression (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Memorials* 190–193). One of her admirers, Shaykh Šálih Karímí, a learned Arab cleric from Karbala, was the first Bábí martyr in Persia (Walbridge 1999).

Early Arab believers supported Ṭáhirih’s efforts and provided her safe passage out of Baghdad when she was ordered to leave. Among the armed men escorting her caravan were Shaykh Sulṭán; Shaykh Muḥammad Shibl and his distinguished son, Muḥammad Muṣṭafá; and Shaykh Šálih. Shaykh Muḥammad Shibl defrayed the expenses of the journey (‘Abdu’l-Bahá, *Memorials*: 190–193). These Arab believers greatly influenced the course of events during Bahá’u’lláh’s sojourn in Iraq years later and continued to support the expansion of the Faith in Arab lands after the passing of Bahá’u’lláh. In *Memorials of the Faithful*, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá described Muḥammad Muṣṭafá as a ‘Blazing Light’, a ‘leader among the friends in Iraq’, and ‘a shooting star’ (*Memorials* 130). Muḥammad Muṣṭafá spent many years in Beirut serving the Faith and attending to the needs of pilgrims. He was also instrumental in establishing the first Bahá’í community in what was later known as Lebanon (Zeine 2006: 269).

Finally, the Arabic language, which is closely associated with Arab identity and is a critical aspect of Arab culture, was revered and eloquently used by both the Báb and Bahá’u’lláh as one of the two main languages of revelation. The Báb’s Arabic Bayán and His celebrated commentary on the Surah of Joseph, the Qayyúmu’l-Asmá’, are a few examples of the large corpus of His Arabic texts. More than half of the writings of Bahá’u’lláh—including the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, referred to as the ‘Charter of the future world civilization’ by Shoghi Effendi (*God Passes By* 213)—were revealed in Arabic. Bahá’u’lláh praised Arabic and preferred to use it in tablets and other writings where its precision of meaning was particularly appropriate. Beyond the choice of language itself, however, the style employed by Bahá’u’lláh is of an exalted and emotive character, immensely compelling, particularly to those familiar with the great literary tradition out of which it arose (Kitáb-i-Aqdas 9).

Historical presence in the Arab world and engagement with the Arabs

The experience of the Bahá’ís in the Arab world is different from the experience of the Bahá’ís in Iran. It lacks the deep-seated hostility by which the authorities, propelled by the religious leaders, carried out and continue to carry out systematic persecutions against the Bahá’ís to eradicate the Faith, not only from Iran, but from the entire region.

The Ministry of Bahá'u'lláh

Bahá'u'lláh's relationship with the Arabs, which was well documented by contemporary historians and recorded in numerous eyewitness accounts, reflected the reverence, love, and respect that the people, leaders, and intellectuals in Iraq and Palestine developed for His person. When Bahá'u'lláh was exiled from Iran to Baghdad in 1853, the dignitaries in that city, including its governor, recognized His noble status and actions, and that His compassion, charity, and service to the local community was deeper than that of the many princes and princelings who fled or were banished to Iraq from Iran. They consequently treated Him accordingly.

The recognition that Bahá'u'lláh received from them increased the jealousy of Mírzá Yaḥyá (d. 1912), His half-brother, and his drive to seize control of the Bábí community. This created a series of internal crises that deeply saddened Bahá'u'lláh and led to His sudden departure from Baghdad on April 10, 1854 for the mountain wilderness around Sulaymaniyah in Kurdistan, Iraq (Balyuzi 1980: 115–122).

During Bahá'u'lláh's stay in the mountain caves under an assumed identity (Balyuzi 1980: 116–119), He encountered various sects of Sufism, especially the Naqshbandí order, who came to revere Him and consider Him of the highest rank of spirituality. They asked Him to remain with them and be their teacher, which He kindly refused. They frequently asked Bahá'u'lláh to provide explanations and commentaries on several famous Islamic works, including the famous Sufi ode 'The Poem of the Way' (*Naẓmu's-Sulúke*), also known as '*Al-Tá'íyyatu'l-Kubrâ*', written by the celebrated Muslim mystic Ibnu'l-Fárid (d. 1234), resulting in the revelation of several of His major works (see the chapter on Bahá'u'lláh's writings). The descendants of the Kurdish people and of the Kurdish Sufi scholars continue to cherish the memory of Bahá'u'lláh's sojourn in their region, and hold on to His tablets and writings to this day, considering them sacred family heirlooms which they refuse to part with, regardless of the price offered (Balyuzi 1980: 118–119).

Bahá'u'lláh returned to Baghdad two years later, and despite the continuous internal strife and disunity generated by Mírzá Yaḥyá, Bahá'u'lláh rebuilt the community and re-established its prestige. His integrity, friendliness, generosity, and high moral conduct gained Him the respect of not only the officials in the city, but its general population. He was known among the people of Baghdad as 'Our Father of Compassion'. In His discourses with the learned, Bahá'u'lláh offered contemporary solutions and a vision of a future of mankind (Blomfield 1967: chap. 3), which He expanded on later in His writings, including His letters to the kings and rulers of the world (Bahá'u'lláh, *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts*). His spiritual authority and influence increased so much that all who felt aggrieved and oppressed in the city approached Him and sought His assistance and intercession (Balyuzi 1991: 128).

Because of constant instigation by the Persian Mission in Iraq and the mischief and deception of Mírzá Yaḥyá, on March 27, 1863, Bahá'u'lláh received an order from the Ottoman Sultan to leave Baghdad for Istanbul. On the afternoon of April 22, 1863, in a final farewell gathering with His family and companions, arranged by 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Bahá'u'lláh entered the Najíbíyyih garden and stayed there for 12 days before His final departure from the city. It was in this island garden in Baghdad, on Arab land, where Bahá'u'lláh chose to first declare that He was 'He Whom God shall make manifest', the Messenger of God promised by the Báb. Shoghi Effendi wrote that this event 'signalizes the commencement of what has come to be recognized as the holiest and most significant of all Bahá'í festivals' (*God Passes By* 148–152). This event, combined with the extended sojourn of Bahá'u'lláh in Iraq, grants the country a special status in the Bahá'í world, designated by Bahá'u'lláh as a future site of pilgrimage.

From Baghdad, Bahá'u'lláh was exiled to Istanbul; then to Edirne in European Turkey for five years; and finally to the prison city of 'Akká, Palestine, the most notorious penal colony in the

Ottoman Empire (Balyuzi 1980: 283–284). Bahá'u'lláh, His family, and some close companions boarded a ship in Gallipoli that sailed to the port of Alexandria in Egypt. They then boarded another ship that transported Bahá'u'lláh and His companions to the port of Haifa. From there, they took a smaller sailing vessel to 'Akká, arriving on August 31, 1868. Bahá'u'lláh and His companions were confined in the citadel for two years, two months, and five days (Taherzadeh 1996: 11–12). At first, they faced starvation. Many fell ill and some died (Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 187). Gradually, through the wise efforts of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, government officials slowly loosened their grip on the prisoners, allowing them to buy their own food, and on rare occasions in the later years, they managed to receive pilgrims and guests. The imprisonment and the vicious attacks that the Bahá'ís in Persia were facing at the time did not dampen the spirit of Bahá'u'lláh. According to Shoghi Effendi, Bahá'u'lláh's confinement 'did not arrest, nor could it even impede, to the slightest degree, the mighty stream of Divine Revelation, which without interruption, had been flowing from His pen' (*God Passes By* 204).

After Bahá'u'lláh's passing on May 29, 1892,

For a full week a vast number of mourners, rich and poor alike, tarried to grieve with the bereaved family, partaking day and night of the food that was lavishly dispensed by its members. Notables, among whom were numbered Shí'ahs, Sunnís, Christians, Jews and Druzes, as well as poets, 'ulamás and government officials, all joined in lamenting the loss, and in magnifying the virtues and greatness of Bahá'u'lláh, many of them paying to Him their written tributes, in verse and in prose, in both Arabic and Turkish. From cities as far afield as Damascus, Aleppo, Beirut and Cairo similar tributes were received.

(Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 222–223)

These glowing testimonials about Bahá'u'lláh were offered to 'Abdu'l-Bahá, and Shoghi Effendi explained, 'the eulogies often mingled praise of Him with the homage paid to His father' (223).

Ministry of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

With Bahá'u'lláh's passing, 'Abdu'l-Bahá became His successor and Head of the Bahá'í Faith. Except for His first eight years of life in Iran, five years in Edirne, and two years travelling to Europe and North America, 'Abdu'l-Bahá lived His life in Arab lands and among the Arabs. While a youth in Iraq, He was engaged in service to His father and to the community of believers and managed the affairs of the Holy Household. He was His father's trusted companion and the first one to recognize Bahá'u'lláh's station. During His years in the Holy Land, and His visits to Lebanon and Egypt, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was actively engaged in service to the people and in public discourse on local and global issues.

Through His knowledge; wisdom; character; charity; long-term planning; genuine engagement in the life of the community; interfaith work with all religious leaders of His time; and intellectual discourse with intellectuals, poets, and writers in the region, 'Abdu'l-Bahá became recognized as one of the leading intellectuals and distinguished religious leaders in the region. This status was further recognized by His engagement with prominent people, the examples He set, and the talks He gave during His travels. His message of peace and inclusion—and His recognition of the significant contribution of all religions, especially Christianity and Islam—was widely published by the Arab media and perceived by many Arab intellectuals as reintroducing Eastern spirituality to the West (Qubain 1922; Al-'Aqqád 1930).

In Palestine, 'Abdu'l-Bahá held weekly gatherings with Arab thinkers, writers, poets, and religious leaders, creating a unique space for discourse about the affairs of society at the time and a

safe place for a conversation on ways to advance human civilization through peace, love, and collaboration. Such gatherings also took place during His sojourn in Egypt and His visits to Lebanon.

During His visit to Beirut in 1887, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá met intellectuals and Arab leaders, among them Shakib Arslan (1869–1946), a Druze prince from Lebanon and an active politician with a wide network of contacts and allies among the leaders of the Young Ottoman movement, who later played a significant role in the Arab Renaissance. Arslan was known as Amír al-Bayán (Prince of Eloquence) because, in addition to being a politician, he was an influential writer, poet, and historian. Arslan frequently corresponded with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and visited Him numerous times in ‘Akká. Arslan expressed his great respect and admiration for ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in his correspondence with Him. In his review and edit of ‘Ajjáj Nuwayhid’s Arabic translation of Lothrop Stoddard’s book *The New World of Islam* (1922), Arslan provided extensive commentary and additions to the manuscript in which he included information about the Bahá’í Faith and highly praised ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s knowledge, intelligence, theology, logic, open-mindedness, and command of the Arabic language, stating that, ‘Even if one says that he was a rare miracle of his time, he would not be exaggerating’ (Stoddard 1971: 274–275).

Following the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, all political and religious prisoners of the Ottoman Empire—including ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and His family—were set free. This allowed ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to travel to Europe in 1911 and to North America in 1912. His message of peace and His efforts to unite the East and West were not only widely covered in Europe and the United States, but also in the Arab world, especially in Palestine, Egypt, and Lebanon, where He was heralded as an Ambassador of the Arabs and the defender of Islam in the West.

His talks on unity and peace resonated with Arab intellectuals living abroad, such as Ameen Rihani and Gibran Khalil Gibran, and influenced their works with themes that were inspired by Bahá’í spirituality and such Bahá’í principles as unity and freedom from all types of prejudice. These intellectuals were not living in the diaspora in isolation but were in close contact through writing and travel with like-minded Arab intellectuals in the Arab world.²

Ameen Rihani (1876–1940) never met ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, but according to his biographer, Fiktúr [Victor] Al-Kak (1987), Rihani was greatly influenced by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s work and messages. Bushrui (2014) asserts that this is especially evident in Rihani’s work, *The Book of Khalid* (1911). Further, in *My Will*, which Rihani wrote in September 1931, nine years before his passing, Rihani clearly declares his belief in the ‘oneness of religion’, a fundamental Bahá’í concept, and that all the prophets and messengers of God, including Confucius, Buddha, Zoroaster, Socrates, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad, and Bahá’u’lláh, are from the same source (1982: 25–26).

Gibran, one of the most recognized Arab intellectuals in the West, was introduced to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá during His visit to New York in 1912 by Juliet Thompson, a writer, artist, and influential figure in New York society at the time, who was a Bahá’í and a great admirer of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Gibran was familiar with the Bahá’í Faith through his discussions with Thompson and some of the Arabic writings she had shared with him. He was very excited when she asked him to draw ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s portrait. Gibran attended ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s talks in New York, met Him in person and talked to Him on three different occasions before ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s sitting for the portrait. At times Gibran even served as His interpreter for the many visitors who came to see Him. Gibran shared his anticipation and excitement about meeting ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and drawing His portrait with May Ziadeh (d. 1941), the prominent poet and writer, his close friend, and beloved. Their correspondence illustrates the reverence by which Gibran approached this task and its impact on his future writings. Reflecting on his experience, Gibran wrote, ‘For the first time I saw a form noble enough to be a receptacle for the Holy Spirit’ (Bushrui and Jenkins 1998: 9).

The outpouring of sorrow and grief that struck the Arab community when they heard the news of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s passing, on the evening of November 28, 1921, is a strong testimony to

the love and admiration the people of Palestine and other Arabs had for Him in their hearts. In a documented eyewitness account, Jamíl al-Baḥrî (1921) describes the outpouring of grief and respect expressed by the people of Haifa; leaders of the Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and Druze communities; government officials such as the British High Commissioner and the Governors of Haifa and of Jerusalem; and intellectuals, poets, and writers. It is estimated that no less than ten thousand people from all walks of life attended His funeral (Al-Baḥrî 1921).

The coffin containing ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s body was carried on the shoulders of the people in a funeral procession from His house to its resting place on Mount Carmel. Prior to the burial, numerous speeches, poems, and orations were delivered in honour of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and in celebration of His person, life, and service to the community. The speakers included the Governor of Haifa, the Head of the Roman Orthodox Church, and prominent community leaders, poets, and orators (Qubain, 1922) who knew ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s character, witnessed His charity and intellect, understood His global influence, and participated in the inclusive interfaith and intellectual community that He fostered, led, and supported.

The news of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s passing dominated local newspapers, which provided a full coverage of the funeral, a list of the speakers, and in some cases, the full content of the orations and poems delivered at the funeral. Some newspapers ran full articles on subsequent days speaking about ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s life, contributions, and influence, not only on the local community but globally. The news of His passing was also widely covered in several countries in the region, especially Egypt and Lebanon.

In April 1922, Salim Qubain, the distinguished Palestinian–Jordanian journalist, writer, and translator, published and edited a book with chapters by Abu’l-Faql Gulpáygání and Tawfíq Afandí *Gharíb* in praise of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and His Faith (Qubain 1922). In addition to sections describing ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s life of charity and service among the Arabs of Palestine and information about the Bahá’í Faith, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s funeral and copies of the eulogies, speeches, and poems delivered in commemoration of His passing were also included. The book was written shortly after the passing of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in response to false statements and baseless accusations against the Faith, as Qubain himself asserts in his introduction.

The ministry of Shoghi Effendi

After the passing of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in 1921, His grandson, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (1897–1957), became the appointed Guardian of the Bahá’í Faith (q.v. ‘Shoghi Effendi’). He developed and implemented a comprehensive and systematic expansion plan that took the Faith to every continent in the world. He established a truly global community, connected through a grassroots Administrative Order with its World Centre in the Holy Land, where the remains of its Central Figures were laid to rest. With the assistance of Bahá’ís and their offspring who were exiled with Bahá’u’lláh to the Holy Land or came as visitors and stayed to serve, the Guardian managed to safeguard and beautify the sacred properties, complete the Shrine of the Báb in 1953, and set in motion a plan for the establishment of the Bahá’í administrative centre on Mount Carmel. The Guardian managed Bahá’í affairs from his central location in Haifa.

Shoghi Effendi’s intimate relationship with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, his knowledge of His vision, his careful planning, understanding of world affairs, and extensive cultural and linguistic competencies, including his fluency in Arabic, English, Persian, and French, and knowledge of Turkish, allowed Shoghi Effendi to navigate the charged politics of the region and maintain the neutrality of the Bahá’í community while encouraging global and equitable solutions to the conflicts. At the same time, Shoghi Effendi continued to foster and strengthen the positive relationships ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had with Arabs. For example, in January 1930, he asked Martha Root, a

journalist and renowned Bahá'í teacher, to meet with King Faisal of Iraq, who had previously met 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 1920. She carried to the king the greetings of the Guardian, discussed the need to establish world peace, encouraged the king to join the League of Nations, and enquired about the status of the Bahá'í community and its property in his kingdom. Root was greatly impressed by the king, who spoke fondly of 'Abdu'l-Bahá and shared his vision for a plural, inclusive, vibrant, and educated Iraq and a united Arab world actively contributing to world peace and global prosperity (Zinky 1983: 147–151).

During King Faisal's rule in Iraq, the Bahá'í Faith was recognized as an independent religion. In 1950 the Court of First Instance in Kirkuk registered a Bahá'í marriage, the first time a Bahá'í marriage was recognized in the region. This created an important precedent and the Guardian encouraged other Bahá'í communities, especially Egypt, to seek similar legal recognition (Shoghi Effendi, *Unfolding Destiny* 249).

The Guardian maintained close contact with Bahá'í groups throughout the Arab world, especially prior to the establishment of the State of Israel. His encouragement and guidance led to the establishment of functioning communities in Egypt and Sudan, the Levant, Iraq, the Arabian Peninsula, and North Africa. One example is his correspondence with Abu'l-Qasim Faizi, an Iranian educator and a graduate of the American University of Beirut, who moved to Iraq and then to Bahrain with his wife Gloria, herself a prolific writer, to serve the community. Encouraged by Shoghi Effendi, Faizi travelled extensively within the region, mentoring generations of educators and their students.

Aware of the political conflict after the 1948 War, Shoghi Effendi asked most resident Bahá'ís to leave the Holy Land while keeping a small number of volunteers to maintain and protect Bahá'í properties. The Guardian purposefully restricted contact and visits of Bahá'ís from Arab and Muslim countries to the newly established State of Israel. This policy was maintained by the Universal House of Justice until 2017, when it was partially lifted. This was many years after Arab countries like Egypt and Jordan had established formal relationships with Israel and lifted travel restrictions.

Between crises and victories—toward legal recognition

Examining the history of the Bahá'ís in the Arab world reveals a series of victories and crises. The more prominent and accepted a Bahá'í community became, the more concern its presence raised among religious clerics who saw its inclusive culture, independent spirit, and flexible administrative system—which replaced the dominance and authority of clergy with community-based, democratically elected administrative bodies—as a threat to their control, position, and influence. This is best demonstrated through the historical development and challenges faced by the Bahá'í community of Egypt.

Egypt is historically significant for Bahá'ís, in part due to the visits and intermittent stays of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in the country, His engagement with its thinkers and journalists, and the contacts and friendship He forged with Eastern and Western intellectuals, politicians, and religious leaders that met with Him during these visits. It is also significant for the legal challenges that the Bahá'ís in Egypt faced, first from the highest religious authorities of Sunni Islam—al-Azhar and its jurists, intellectuals, and clerics—and then from all branches of the Egyptian government. These legal challenges eventually led to the recognition of the independence of the Bahá'í Faith and its separation from Islam.

Persian Bahá'í merchants settled in Egypt and established flourishing businesses during Bahá'u'lláh's imprisonment in Edirne (in modern Turkey) during the mid-1860s. As a result of the persistent efforts of Persian authorities, who tracked the movement of Bahá'ís through their diplomats, several of these Bahá'ís were imprisoned on charges of proselytization. Some were exiled to Sudan and later released.

Bahá'u'lláh sent one of His believers, His chief chronicler Nabil-i-Zarandí (d. 1892), to Egypt to enquire about the release of the imprisoned Bahá'ís, but he was arrested and imprisoned himself. While in prison, Zarandí met a Christian physician named Fáris, who accepted the Faith and became the first Arab Christian to do so. Later, Zarandí was released after his sentence was appealed to the Prime Minister of Egypt.

In 1877, a new group of Bahá'ís settled in Port Said and established prosperous businesses there. Due to its strategic geographic location, the city became a resting place for Bahá'í travelers to the Holy Land and a centre for communication with Bahá'ís around the world.

Another group of Bahá'ís moved to Egypt in 1897 to work in various industries, especially in tea and textiles. The arrival of the most respected of Bahá'í scholars, Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl Gulpáygání (d. 1914) in Cairo, after his stay in 'Akká for ten months at the invitation of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, marked a new stage of the development of the Bahá'í Faith in the Arab world.

On his arrival in Cairo, Gulpáygání began attending the University of al-Azhar, the foremost institution of learning in the Sunni Muslim world. Many of the students at the university recognized his profound knowledge and intellect and thirty of them became Bahá'ís. This marked the entry of a significant number of learned Egyptians into the Bahá'í Faith, who subsequently played a major role in the Faith's expansion (Momen 1995).

Gulpáygání also engaged with Arab intellectuals, writers, poets, and journalists. He frequented a popular café, Café Matati, where they gathered and discussed the affairs of the time. Among his companions were 'Abdu'l-'Azíz Jáwísh (d. 1929), an Oxford graduate, writer, and reformer; 'Alí Yúsuf (d. 1913), a journalist and owner of *Al-Mu'ayyad* newspaper; Ahmed Lotfi El Sayed (d. 1963), an Arab nationalist and owner of *Al-Jaridah* newspaper; Mohammed Hussein Heikal (d. 1956), a celebrated journalist who played a major role in Egyptian politics for decades and served as Chief Editor of *Al-Ahrám* newspaper; Hafiz Ibrahim (d. 1932), a prolific poet; and Khalil Matran (d. 1949), a Lebanese poet and author who lived most of his life in Egypt (Batah, 1995).

Gulpáygání continued to teach and defend the Bahá'í Faith emphatically and publicly. He translated Bahá'í scripture into Arabic, published articles and commentaries in newspapers, and authored and published several manuscripts. Gulpáygání's contacts and the positive reception of the masses and the intellectuals to his message of one universal Faith raised concern among the clerics, especially in al-Azhar, and resulted in their issuing a decree labelling him an 'infidel' (Momen 1995). This did not stop Gulpáygání from writing, publishing, travelling, and teaching about the Bahá'í Faith.

Following the Young Turk Revolution of 1908, all political and religious prisoners of the Ottoman Empire—including 'Abdu'l-Bahá and His family—were set free. This allowed 'Abdu'l-Bahá to travel freely beyond the boundaries of the Levant. He visited Egypt three times. The first was in 1910, for a year. He then went to Europe for five months, August to December 1911, and on His return, He stayed in Alexandria for three months. He then left directly from Port Said to Europe and New York on March 25, 1912. 'Abdu'l-Bahá returned to Port Said from Europe on June 17, 1913, and remained in Egypt for the next five and a half months—relocating to a few different cities and suburbs along the way (Ismailia, Ramleh, Abu Qir)—until He left Alexandria for the Holy Land on December 2, 1913.

In addition to meeting with the Egyptian Bahá'ís, 'Abdu'l-Bahá was visited by intellectuals, journalists, writers, and clerics from many different religious denominations, sects, and nationalities. This, coupled with the contacts that Gulpáygání had established, generated a great deal of interest among Arab intellectuals and journalists in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's travels and talks in the West, which were widely covered by the Middle Eastern media. They were especially impressed by

His message of peace, inclusion, and the positive image of Arabs and Islam that He promoted in His talks. Later, Egyptian media covered extensively the news of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s passing in 1921.

In 1925, Egypt became the first predominantly Muslim country to state openly that the Bahá’í Faith is an independent religion, following an Egyptian court’s ruling that the Faith was separate from Islam, and that consequently, Bahá’ís could not be deemed Muslims. This led to greater emancipation for Egyptian Bahá’ís in the decades thereafter, and they were legally recognized in the 1930s (Bashir 2012). Egyptian Bahá’í communities functioned and thrived during this period; they elected a national Spiritual Assembly, acquired Bahá’í centres and cemeteries, held local and public events, and participated in the life of the Egyptian society.

This recognition and public presence were followed by a new wave of attacks, mainly by the clergy. Arab intellectuals who knew about the Faith through meeting its leading figures, especially ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, or who had close contact with local Bahá’í communities, either dismissed the attacks or came to the defence of the Bahá’ís. These included ‘Abbás Maḥmúd al-‘Aqqád (1889–1964), a prominent Egyptian journalist, poet, and literary critic. On January 1, 1930, Al-‘Aqqád defended ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the Bahá’í Faith in the *Al-Hilál* newspaper. He described in detail his visit to and conversation with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and highly praised His knowledge, intellect, and inclusiveness. Al-‘Aqqád also shared in his article highlights of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s talks in the West; emphasized His role in renewing Western interest in Eastern spirituality; and shared His positions on a range of topics including theology, history, and the social issues of the time.

The spread of the Faith among small rural communities generated a new wave of attacks against Egyptian Bahá’ís instigated by Muslim clerics. This was followed by a fatwa (a formal legal opinion or religious decree) issued by the Head of the Fatwa Committee at al-Azhar, *Shaykh* ‘Abdu’l-Majíd Salím, in September 1949, in which he declared that ‘Bahá’ism is by no means a Muslim sect because, this creed is contradictory with the principles of Islam’. The fatwa declared Bahá’í marriage as null and void. Ironically, even though the ruling was against the Bahá’ís, it publicly declared that the Bahá’í Faith is separate from Islam, and thus recognized it as an independent religion. The ruling was very important because it came from the most recognized Sunni religious authority in the world (Salloum 2017b).

The 1949 *fatwa* was widely disseminated and used as the basis for further attacks on the Egyptian Bahá’í community. In 1950, the Egyptian daily *Miṣru’l-Fattáh* #692 printed an interview with an Egyptian cleric who attacked the Bahá’ís, warned Muslims about converting to their beliefs, called them ‘apostates’, and asked that they be treated as infidels. In another article published in *Manáru’l-Islám*, the same cleric attacked the person of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá as well.

Despite these periodic episodes of religious attacks through the first half of the 20th century, the Bahá’í community in Egypt was free to worship and run its administrative affairs. That changed on July 19, 1960, when President Gamal Abdul Nasser unexpectedly issued *Presidential Decree 263* dissolving all Bahá’í assemblies, banning all Bahá’í activities, and confiscating all Bahá’í properties.

The 1960 Decree remains in effect to this day and is an underlying source of the Egyptian Bahá’í community’s continued oppression. All Bahá’í properties—including the community’s national headquarters building, its libraries, and its cemeteries, as well as all Bahá’í funds and assets—were confiscated. The decree made Bahá’í activities criminal offences punishable by a minimum imprisonment of six months and/or a fine of 100 to 1,000 Egyptian pounds. This took place at a time of extreme nationalism, when Nasser was seeking unity with Syria and Iraq; was eager to please his religious critics and political allies; and was forging new alliances, thereby side-lining any group that might be perceived—however directly, indirectly, or remotely—as tarnishing his image or plan.

Following the decree and in keeping with the Bahá'í principle of obedience to one's government, the Bahá'ís of Egypt disbanded their administrative structure. They were promised freedom of worship, but faced episodes of harsh persecution, along with continuous restrictions on their personal, religious, and social activities, including arrests and imprisonments in 1960, 1963, 1967, 1985, 1987, 1997, and 2001. All accusations against the Bahá'ís were baseless and, in all cases, individuals were eventually released with no explanations, or were acquitted by the courts.

The Muslim clerics not only issued fatwas against the Bahá'ís, but also instigated popular oppression of the Bahá'ís and called on the government to 'create legislation that [would] uproot it and bury its ideology' (Jáda'l-Ḥaqq 1987). Several anti-Bahá'í books were published by the leaders of Islamic groups known historically for their opposition to the Faith, including Anṣáru's-Sunnati'l-Muḥammadíyyah, who were allied with the Muslim Brotherhood and who admired and were sympathetic to the clergy in Iran. These Egyptian fatwas established precedents emulated by other Arab Sunni clerics when directly asked about their position regarding the Bahá'í Faith. For example, in explaining a verdict he issued against the Bahá'ís, 'Abdu'l 'Azíz bin Báz, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia (1993–1999) admitted that he did not 'read any of the Bahá'í sources', but relied on Sunni scholars' positions and information in *Anṣáru's-Sunnah* publications (Bin Báz, <https://bit.ly/2ZgTmxD>).

The identity card issue and the aftermath of the Arab Spring

Following the 1960 Presidential Decree, the Bahá'ís of Egypt faced challenges in obtaining national identification cards. Because there was no specific government policy, the issuing of the government cards differed from one government office to another. Some would refuse to issue a card unless the Bahá'í declared him/herself a member of one of the 'recognized state religions' (Islam, Christianity, Judaism). Other offices allowed Bahá'í or 'Other' on the application, or a dash in the religion field. The Bahá'ís took their case to court and in 1983 an administrative court affirmed that the Bahá'ís should be able to have an identity card with 'Bahá'í' or 'Other' specified.

In 2004, the Ministry of the Interior issued Circular 49/2004, a directive that instructed government officials not to issue any new National Identity Cards or any other new government documents unless the individual identified with one of the three state-recognized religions. This eliminated the option of 'Other', a dash, or leaving the religion field blank. This directive was followed by the digitization of the application process, which only included the three state-recognized religions as choices. The Bahá'ís were forced to either falsely choose a religion that was not theirs, which had legal implications, or lose their right to possess a National Identity Card, which was required for all legal and financial transactions, such as opening bank accounts, registering children in school, obtaining birth and death certificates, processing inheritances, and applying for jobs.

Soon after the policy was implemented, a Bahá'í couple who were denied identity cards challenged the 2004 policy, were legally represented by an independent Cairo-based NGO, and received a favourable ruling in 2006 by the Court of Administrative Justice, which upheld that 'Bahá'ís must be allowed to identify their religion properly on government forms and that the government cannot deny them official documents if they do so' (Kourosh 2012: 32–33).

The ruling was attacked by al-Azhar and the Muslim Brotherhood and in 2006 the Supreme Administrative Court overturned the 2006 decision and upheld the 2004 policy. This was intensely covered by the media, especially by the Egyptian blogger community. It also received international attention and unprecedented support from local civic and human rights organizations who documented in detail the genesis of the new policy and widely publicized it in favour

of the Bahá'ís. With the advent of social media, Bahá'ís for the first time were able to publicly argue their case in Arabic without censorship (Akhtarkhavari 2006).

Two other rulings in 2007 and 2008 upheld the 2006 decision, with the latter stating that while Bahá'ís could not list 'Bahá'í' as their religion on government documents, they must be permitted to insert a dash in the religion field (Kourosh 2012). The government subsequently upheld the court order.

The 2011 Arab Spring generated new demands for freedom and awareness of minority rights, and in some instances, Bahá'ís were welcomed to participate in national dialogues about the future of Egypt. This changed in 2012 with the election of Mohamed Morsi (d. 2019) as president and control of the government by the Muslim Brotherhood. The Bahá'ís were openly attacked, and their civil rights were threatened. The situation improved with the presidency of Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in 2014 (Salloum 2017b).

The case of the Bahá'ís in Egypt clearly demonstrates the resiliency of the Arab Bahá'í communities and the vulnerability of their presence in Arab countries.

Jordan: socio-economic development and prosperity

The case of the Bahá'ís in Jordan provides further insight into the presence of the Bahá'í community among Arabs and illustrates that, while these experiences have common elements, at the same time, they differ based on the wide differences in the nature of the population and the unique socio-economic and political factors that govern each Arab country.

After World War I, the Bahá'í communities in Iraq, Syria, and Transjordan were ruled by the Hashemites, who enjoyed great respect and popularity in the region because of their descent from the tribe of the Hashemite Prophet Muhammad, their role in leading the Arab Revolt, their support of Arab national sentiment, and their experience in politics and governance. The Bahá'í communities stayed away from partisan politics and distinguished themselves through service and their productive and skilled workers and professionals, and consequently were welcomed to the newly established kingdoms, recognized, and allowed to worship and operate freely.

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan with its stable government, open-minded tribal populations, proximity to the centre of Bahá'í administration in Haifa, and the early experience of its leadership and population with the first Bahá'í village in the Jordan Valley provided a positive environment for the development of a national Bahá'í community. In about 1901, 'Abdu'l-Bahá purchased an undeveloped village just east of the Jordan River near the Sea of Galilee called 'Adasíyyah and invited mainly Zoroastrian-heritage Bahá'ís from Iran, who were dedicated believers and skilled farmers accustomed to hardship, to come to Jordan, partner with Him, cultivate the land, and build the nucleus for a Bahá'í community. His goal was to create a model agrarian community that was sustainable, environmentally sound, socio-economically beneficial to the local community, and capable of producing a surplus that would help feed the region, in anticipation of the food scarcity caused by the impending war in Europe (Poostchi 2016; Ruhi 2021a).

The first Bahá'ís settled in the village in 1901–1902, and through 'Abdu'l-Bahá's guidance, they cleared and cultivated the land, planted fruit trees and other crops such as wheat, and introduced new species such as bananas and eggplant (aubergine) to the region. Relying on their experiences at home, they dug canals for irrigation, planted eucalyptus trees to combat malaria, and used proven methods to produce healthy and generous harvests. A community was created with schools for the children, adult education classes, community committees, and an administrative structure based on a grassroots, consultative, community management approach. Policies

were created to ensure engagement, fair treatment, and equitable pay for local Arab workers from neighbouring villages and tribes.

The village prospered and, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá had hoped, it produced a surplus of wheat that was stored and used to feed the population of the region and combat the famine that swept the Levant during World War I. With it, 'Abdu'l-Bahá saved the lives of thousands of people and even fed the Allied Forces when they were short of supplies. In recognition of this exceptional humanitarian effort, the British government bestowed a Knighthood on 'Abdu'l-Bahá, a title that He accepted at the insistence of the British Government, and in recognition of the efforts of the friends, but one from which He never personally benefited.

After World War I, 'Adasiyyah remained the breadbasket of Jordan. It became a vibrant and self-sufficient community with its own school, infrastructure, electricity, and water supplies. The development of this community within Jordan marked the success of the first socio-economic project the Bahá'ís undertook with Arabs and became an example for future projects around the world.

Meanwhile, other Bahá'ís settled in different parts of Jordan, including the capital, Amman, and its neighbouring city, Al-Salt, where Bahá'ís contributed to the development of Jordan's early education and national curriculum.

The Bahá'ís of Jordan maintained trust and good relationships with the ruling Hashemites and all branches of the government and remained above partisan politics. 'Adasiyyah was recognized as an example of progress and modernity and was visited by King Abdallah I prior to his coronation. His son, Prince Talál, who reigned over Jordan for a short time, stayed in the village with his family as guests of the Bahá'ís for a whole week and enjoyed their hospitality. The village was also visited on numerous occasions by King Hussein, who came for leisure and recreation, feeling safe enough to fly his helicopter and land on its grounds, walk in its gardens, visit the Bahá'í Centre, and meet with the Bahá'ís without his aides (Ruhi 2021a).

During the 1967 War, 'Adasiyyah was abandoned after sustaining major damage. The land was later divided and sold as agricultural units in 1974. The former residents of the village migrated to neighbouring cities and towns, integrating into all the regions of Jordan, carrying with them their experiences, culture, and inclusive approach to community engagement.

The Bahá'ís of Jordan have never experienced problems with practising their Faith and participating in all aspects of social life in the Kingdom. They periodically faced restrictions in recent years regarding holding large public events, which were attributed in part to general security concerns. They actively participate in interfaith work and are engaged in social action in education, inclusion, equity, the environment, moral and spiritual empowerment programmes for children and junior youth, and community-based service projects for youth. They have representation in the media and continue to collaborate with civic organizations providing support to women, children, orphans, the displaced, and the underprivileged (Ruhi 2021a).

Unfortunately, despite the long history and early presence of the Bahá'í community in Jordan, the Bahá'í Faith is not officially recognized, and Bahá'í institutions do not enjoy legal status. As a result, it is not authorized to register marriages, settle inheritances, nor own places of worship and cemeteries, to mention a few examples. The properties are registered in the names of individual Bahá'ís (Salloum 2017a).

On the individual level, the issue of identity cards has been resolved in Jordan. The Jordanian government dropped 'Religion' as an identifying category from the smart ID card form it adopted in 2016.

One remaining complication is that Jordanian civil law requires that all marriages must be performed according to a recognized religious tradition (Muslim, Christian, or Jewish). Since the Bahá'í Faith is not a 'recognized religious tradition' in Jordan, marriages conducted by Bahá'í

institutions are not registered with a date confirming the marriage on the family national ID card issued by the government. The absence of a wedding date makes it difficult to claim rights stemming from marriage or to register a foreign spouse who wants to obtain Jordanian nationality. Further, other family law issues, such as inheritance, are sent to Islamic courts to adjudicate, even though Bahá'í laws on inheritance are different from those of Islam. Bahá'ís try to settle issues of inheritance among themselves or approach a civil court only when necessary (Salloum 2017a; Ersan 2019).

The Jordanian writer and researcher Ibrahim Gharaibeh (2012) considers the Bahá'í Faith the third religion in Jordan, even though it is not currently legally recognized. The government of Jordan claims to protect the rights of all its citizens, including the Bahá'ís, but like many other Arab governments at the present time, it avoids legalizing the Faith for their perceived reaction of the extremist Muslim clergy and their followers to recognizing a new religion after Islam. The lack of legal recognition does not prevent the Bahá'ís from feeling, in general, safe to practise their Faith in Jordan. They continue to be integrated into the life of society and are perceived by its people as an intricate part of its diverse and inclusive community (Ersan 2019).

Yemen: a persecuted minority³

The Yemeni Bahá'í community traces its roots to 1844, when the Báb stopped in the port city of al-Mak^há (Mocha in present-day Yemen) on the Red Sea on His return trip from Mecca to Persia. Later, Yemen became the chosen travel route for hundreds of Bahá'ís traveling from Persia to meet Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá and visit the holy places, creating opportunities for interaction between the Bahá'ís and local Yemenis.

The current situation of the Bahá'ís in Yemen is as complex as the constant political changes that the country has been subjected to during centuries of political conflict. In the early 1950s, several Bahá'ís settled with their families in Yemen. Most were professionals who provided critically needed services in health, engineering, infrastructure development, and education. The Bahá'ís were welcomed by the local Yemeni communities with their historically inclusive culture. An example of these early believers is Kamál bin Ḥaydarah, who served as the family doctor of Sulṭán 'Ísá bin 'Alí Ál-i-'Afrár. In the absence of other physicians, Kamál bin Ḥaydarah served as the doctor of the people of the Island of Socotra, where he lived and raised his family. In appreciation for his dedication and years of service, the Sulṭán offered him Yemeni citizenship and bestowed upon him the title Bin Ḥaydarah [Haydara], a sign of acceptance and appreciation. Another example is Badiullah Sanai, an engineer who received numerous national awards for leading the effort to develop the country's infrastructure by designing and overseeing the construction of many of its roads and bridges.

The political condition in Yemen, influenced by the events taking place in the region, was in constant change. The communist coup in 1968 established the People's Democratic Republic in South Yemen. Many Yemeni nationals fled to neighbouring countries, and all foreigners, including the Persian Bahá'ís, were expelled from the newly established republic. Sulṭán bin 'Afrár and his family, joined by Kamál bin Ḥaydarah and his family, moved to the United Arab Emirates prior to its independence in 1971. Kamál bin Ḥaydarah continued to practise medicine there, and in recognition for his service, he was given Emirati citizenship by a decree from Shaykh Rāshid bin Sa'íd Ál-i-Maktúm (d. 1990), the ruler of the Emirate of Dubai (Salloum 2017c). Many years later, Bin Ḥaydarah's son, Hamed Kamal bin Haydara, returned to Yemen and settled there with his family.

Meanwhile, the Bahá'í community in the north of Yemen continued to function, elected its national Spiritual Assembly in 1984, and increased its service to the community.

The harassment of the Bahá'í community started in 2008 under the Presidency of Abdullah Ali Saleh, at the instigation of the Muslim clergy, when authorities detained six Bahá'ís and eventually deported two of them. The persecutions continued, with the arrest of Hamed bin Haydara in December 2013, who was accused of various unfounded charges, including spying for Israel. The persecution of the Bahá'ís escalated when the Houthis gained control in 2014–2015.

During the following years, the size of the Bahá'í community increased considerably. Several influential Yemeni tribesmen who belonged to the al-Qur'ání order (members believe that the Qur'an is the only valid reference and source of legislation in Islam), including *Shaykh* Waleed Ayyash, a prominent tribesman and decorated military leader, independently discovered the Bahá'í Faith on the Internet. These new believers began to follow the Bahá'í teachings and attracted a significant number of their friends and other members of their tribes to the Faith. Subsequently, many more members of the tribes, including individuals from well-known families with distinguished service records for the country, including in the military and the government, identified themselves as Bahá'ís. As indicated in an interview with Waleed Ayyash (Ruhí 2021b), these local Bahá'ís applied the principles of the Faith not only in their personal lives but also in their collective actions, bringing about tangible cultural and social transformation to their local communities. Although accurate statistics are not available, it is estimated that there are now a few thousand Yemeni Bahá'ís from all walks of life, representing Yemen's diverse culture and its rich heritage.

The wave of new believers energized the Bahá'í community in Yemen, leading to additional notable contributions in various fields including community building, health services, tribal reconciliation, literacy programmes, and humanitarian and disaster relief. Despite living through a turbulent period of civil conflict, the Bahá'ís avoided partisan politics and did not take sides in the conflict. Instead, they created programmes and civic organizations that provided much needed services in their local neighbourhoods and communities, with emphasis on educating children and youth in the principles of inclusiveness, moral fortitude, celebration of diversity, and service that benefits their communities. Further, they created platforms and opportunities for constructive discourse with hundreds of government officials, tribal elders, university professors, journalists, human rights activists, and diplomats to share their message of peace and reconciliation and engage them in non-partisan efforts to rebuild their war-torn society and support all its citizens.

Following the success of the Yemeni Bahá'ís in engaging the community in various projects of education, service, and discourse, the Houthis, instigated by Iran, launched a series of attacks against the Bahá'í community using the same tactics and false accusations the Iranian government and its clergy use in its systematic programme of repression against the Bahá'í community in Iran. In August 2016, the Houthi-Saleh authorities in Sana'a, in a scare tactic, stormed an educational conference organized by the Nida Foundation for Development and the Bahá'í community of Yemen and arrested over sixty men, women, and children, many of whom were not Bahá'ís. They further raided the homes of Bahá'ís and seized their phones and documents, including passports, and compelled their relatives and friends to pay for their release.⁴

In April 2017, Houthi authorities called for the arrest of over twenty-five Bahá'ís, many of them prominent members of the community, under similar accusations that led to the previous year's arrest such as 'showing kindness' and 'displaying rectitude of conduct in order to attract people to their Faith'. By 2018, six Bahá'ís had been arrested—Hamed bin Haydara in 2013, Kayvan Ghaderi in 2016, and Waleed Ayyash, Akram Ayyash, Badiullah Sanai, and Wael al-Arieghie in 2017—and were detained in Yemeni prisons.

On January 2, 2018, the Specialized Criminal Court in Sanaa issued an unprecedented ruling against the Bahá'ís, sentencing Bin Haydara to death due to his religious beliefs; and by doing so,

establishing a dangerous legal precedent. The judge, who demonstrated blatant animosity against the Bahá'ís during previous hearings, also called for the dissolution of all Bahá'í administrative bodies, and proclaimed that its followers were apostates, thereby placing the other Bahá'í prisoners, as well as the Bahá'í community, in eminent danger. The accusations against the Bahá'í Faith were fabricated and the court proceedings were in blatant disregard for the rule of law.

The systematic persecution of the Bahá'ís in Yemen culminating in the death sentence against Bin Haydara generated a strong international condemnation against the Houthi authority's treatment of the Bahá'ís. The effort to release the prisoners was led by the Bahá'í International Community, the United Nations, and international, national, and local human rights agencies, and government leaders who put pressure on the Houthis to release the Bahá'í prisoners (BIC 2021c).

This angered the Houthi authorities, and in a statement of defiance, on March 23, 2018, Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, the leader of the Houthis in Yemen, in the middle of a televised speech intended to rally Yemini against foreign powers and ideologies, explicitly and vehemently attacked the Bahá'í Faith. He called it 'satanic' and falsely claimed that the Bahá'ís were waging a 'soft war' of doctrine against Islam and called for their eradication to protect Islam (Al-Houthi 2018). The Houthis' plan is considered by many to be no less than a systematic plan to eradicate the Bahá'ís of Yemen.⁵

The Houthi leader's statement was widely distributed among his followers and reposted and shared on social media, escalating the rhetoric of hate and instigating violence against the Yemini Bahá'ís.⁶ This led the Bahá'í International Community, and local and international human rights organizations to double their efforts to secure the release of the Bahá'í prisoners.

Then, in an unexpected, televised speech, in March 2020, the president of the Houthi Supreme Political Council, Mahdi al-Mashat, called for the pardon of Bin Haydara and his release as well as that of the five other detained Bahá'ís. The United Nations facilitated negotiations with various Houthi authorities which, after several months, led to the release of the six Bahá'ís. The Houthi authorities stipulated that the prisoners must leave the country upon their release, which they did.

As of September 23, 2021, The Bahá'í International Community (BIC 2021b) listed on its website that the court, controlled by the Houthi authority, which ordered the release and exile of the six Bahá'í prisoners, continued to prosecute them after their release. In August 2020, the court branded the six released prisoners and another nineteen Bahá'ís who had been released earlier as 'fugitives' and demanded that they be brought back to Yemen to stand trial.

The Houthi authority continues to threaten Yemeni Bahá'ís, seize their assets, prevent them from receiving educational and social services, and continues to escalate a rhetoric of hate against them. This encourages some clergy to attack the Bahá'ís to gain popularity and influence among conservatives. This is in contrast with the sympathy and support the Bahá'ís are receiving from local Yemeni communities, civic and human rights organizations, several independent Yemeni digital and print media sources, and even factions within the Houthis themselves. Many who know the Bahá'ís through their decades of life and service to the country or have learned about their case through the wide publicity and media coverage they received, support the Bahá'ís and see their case as a litmus test for the ability of Yemeni society to reclaim its tradition of celebrating its diversity.

Current status of the Bahá'í Faith in the Arab world

The Bahá'í Faith has been present in the Arab world from the time of the Faith's inception and in some instances prior to the establishment of modern nation-states. Currently, there are

Bahá'ís in every Arab country. The Bahá'ís are well integrated and perceive themselves as part of the fabric of the communities they live in. The status of the Bahá'í community in any given Arab country changes in varying degrees, based on the political orientation and alliances of the leadership in these countries. Unfortunately, due to limitations of space, our discussion in this chapter is confined to a few countries, providing only a sample of the range of experiences of the Bahá'í communities in the Arab world.

Despite the periodic arrests and legal challenges that the Bahá'ís have faced in some Arab countries, which have escalated in Yemen in recent years, and the unjustified death sentence handed to Hamed bin Haydara by the Yemeni courts, not a single Bahá'í has ever been executed in the Arab world for his/her religious affiliation. In all cases, any charges other than practising one's Faith were proven baseless, and any accusation of association or loyalty to a foreign power was found to be without merit.

Following the Arab Spring and the increased demand for more freedom, justice, and equity among Arabs, some governments sought, to varying degrees, ways to better include its minorities in interfaith dialogue and engage them in creating more inclusive societies. This is best demonstrated in the case of the Bahá'ís in Bahrain. On November 16, 2011, the Bahá'ís in Bahrain formed a legal Bahá'í Social Association by Royal Decree #53 (www.bahaisocietybh.org/alreysyh), through which many Bahá'í functions are arranged. The government publicly and officially invites the Bahá'ís to participate in all its sponsored events and activities where faith groups are represented. Further, in Jordan, the Bahá'í community's external affairs representative, Tahani Ruhi was invited in 2021 to participate in an interfaith dialogue and provide an article to the Royal Institute for Interfaith Studies (chaired by Prince Hasan bin Talal) to be included in the Institute's special edition celebrating Jordan's Centennial.

Other countries that are more politically and ideologically allied with Iran, or heavily controlled by the clergy, are making it difficult for their Bahá'í communities to be fully functional, such as the case in Yemen, where the head of the Houthi authority has publicly called for the eradication of the Bahá'ís through all possible ways and means.

The refusal of Bahá'ís to become involved in partisan politics, along with the peaceful nature of Bahá'í communities, make them vulnerable targets for scapegoating to appease conservative factions or to divert the people's attention away from the genuine issues their countries face. The Bahá'ís' lack of local political weight, however, is compensated by the strong presence of the Bahá'í Faith in the international community through its Bahá'í International Community (BIC 2021a) Office and its extensive global network, which stems from the global and integrated nature of Bahá'í governance.

Regardless of their legal status and challenges, the Bahá'ís in Arab countries have proven their genuine desire to integrate peacefully into their societies and have demonstrated both their culture of service to all and their ability to work with others in a spirit of amity for the betterment of their local communities.

Notes

- 1 The issue of the Arab identity of the Bahá'í Faith was first discussed by Ramsey Zeine at a presentation given at the 'Irfán Colloquia, Session #62 at the Centre for Bahá'í Studies in Acuto, Italy (July 8–12, 2005). The article was published in 2006 in *Lights of 'Irfán*, vol. 7 (Wilmette: 'Irfán Colloquia), 261–284.
- 2 Many Arab intellectuals shared their works through correspondence and attending various meeting and gatherings; most famous is the literary salons held by May Ziadeh (d. 1941), a Lebanese–Palestinian feminist poet, essayist, and translator. She is considered a key figure of the Nahḍah in the early 20th-century Arab literary scene, and a pioneer of Oriental feminism.

- 3 The case of the Bahá'ís in Yemen received large publicity from Arab and international digital and print media. I have closely followed the case and periodically represented the Bahá'í views in the Arabic-speaking digital and broadcast media. For a full report and links to sources on the situation (of the Bahá'ís) in Yemen, see the Bahá'í International Community link at www.bic.org/situation-in-yemen/reports-situation-yemen.
- 4 Press release dated October 4, 2016 by the Special Rapporteur on the freedom of religion or belief, Heiner Bielefeldt, titled 'Freedom of religion: UN expert urges Yemen to halt systematic harassment of Bahá'í community' www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=20635&LangID=E.
- 5 See further information about Houthi treatment of the Bahá'ís in Yemen at www.bic.org/news/electrocutions-beatings-and-mass-arrests-houthis-iran-inspired-campaign-against-yemeni-bahais.
- 6 For a sample of hate and violence on Twitter against the Bahá'ís following the Houthi leader's statement, see Ahmad Ayed's post at <https://twitter.com/ahmedayed2000/status/977663202606632962>.

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