

Esslemont's Survey of the Bahā'ī Community 1919-1920, Part I : Iran by ['Alī Muhammad] Ibn-i Aṣḍaq and Azīzu'llāh Varqā'

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The Archives of the National Spiritual Assembly of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland contain some of the papers of Dr. John E. Esslemont. From these it is clear that Dr. Esslemont intended to include in his book *Bahá'u'lláh and the New Era* a chapter entitled 'Progress of the Bahá'í Movement'. The chapter was not, in the end included in the book ¹ but Esslemont had collected a large amount of material for it.

Esslemont's main sources for the material he collected for this chapter are as follows:

- a) Written accounts by a number of prominent Bahā'īs about Bahā'ī communities in which they played an important role. These are accounts of the Bahā'ī community in Germany by Alma S. Knobloch, America by Albert Vail, and India by Mīrzā Maḥmūd Zarqānī.
- b) Notes based on oral accounts by Mīrzā `Azīzu'llāh Varqā and the Hand of the Cause Ibn-i Aṣḍaq concerning Iran and Turkestan, Shaykh Faraju'llāh on Egypt and Mīrzā Muḥammad Ḥusayn Vakīl on Iraq. ²
- c) Passages from what was known as "Shoghi Effendi's Diary". These were typewritten copies of notes in English taken by Shoghi Effendi of `Abdu'l-Bahā's utterances during most of 1919 and part of 1920. ³

The importance of this material lies firstly in the fact that this is the first attempt to survey the whole world-wide Bahā'ī community and provides a valuable picture of this community at that early date and secondly in the value of the historical information coming from such important figures. It is of course a pity

that Esslemont did not ever write the chapter itself as his assessment of this material would in itself have been valuable.

Most of this material was collected by Esslemont during his pilgrimage to Haifa, 5 November 1919 to 23 January 1920. This includes all the oral material collected and Esslemont probably asked for the written material at the same time. The account of the Bahā'ī community in Germany by Alma Knobloch is dated March 1920 and is sent from Stuttgart and so Esslemont presumably arranged this after his return from Haifa.

[BSB 3]

This material will be presented in the forthcoming issues of this Bulletin with additional notes and commentary. This material will be reproduced exactly as it is written without any attempt to modify the transliteration.

The first item to be presented here is the outline of the proposed chapter written by Esslemont.

Progress of [the] Bahai Movement

I. Persia. History; Present Position; Women's Organization, need for. S. A. [Spiritual Assembly] -- Election; Functions; Funds. Various kinds of meetings.

II. Turkestan. Immigration of Persians to Iskabad about 1880. Reprieve of murderers; School and Mashraku'l Azkar. Public Library. Star of the East. 2nd Mashraku'l Azkar in Marv.

III. America. Parliament of Religions in 1893. Words of B. [Bahā'u'llāh]. Khayrullah; Thornton Chase. 1894-5 Bahā'īs. 1895 Classes started. 1896 hundreds of believers in Chicago. 1897 N.Y. [New York] assembly started. 1898 1st Pilgrimage to Akka. 1902 Mirza Abul Fazl. Mashraku'l Azkar Proposal. 1907

Site chosen. 1910 Star of the West started. 1912 Abdu'l-Baha's visit. 1919 Teaching Tablets. 1920 Mashraku'l Azkar Plans.

IV. India. About 40 years ago- Suleyman Khan, Jamal Efendi. Mandalay and Rangoon. Bombay. Konjangoon. 2 Villages 300 pop. Mashraku'l Azkar and school. In Mandalay and Konjangoon men and women meet together. Abolition of caste prejudices. Annual Conference. 2000 in all.

V. Germany. 1907. Dr.Fisher, Anna Knobloch. Oct.-1st address in Women's Club at Stuttgart. 1908- 1st Assembly organised. 1909- Esslingen. 1913, April. `Abdu'l-Bahā 8 days. Charitable work: Children.

VI. Egypt.

VII. England.

VIII. Elsewhere.

IX. How we can help.

[BSB 4] Of the above section headings, there is material for all except the section on England which Esslemont presumably intended to write himself. There is also no indication of what he intended to put in the last section.

The material that Esslemont collected regarding Iran consists of one type-written section, the authorship of which is uncertain but it may be by Ibn-i Aşdaq, some notes from a conversation with Ibn-i Aşdaq on 14th November 1919, and a sheet entitled "Baha'i Meetings in Teheran" from a talk with `Azīzu'llāh Khān Varqā.

The following are the type-written notes:

PERSIA

In 1260 A.H., the Tree of the Baha'i Cause took root in the soil of Persia. Hazrate the Supreme, Bab, began to teach and guide the people. He raised the call of the glad tidings and prepar-[sic] the people for the teachings and the Bounties of the Blessed Beauty. If we consider the condition of the people of Persia at that time, we see how how were their minds and hearts from readiness to accept that teaching. The people were submerged in ignorance and superstitions. The limitations and prejudices of the Mollahs poisoned the minds of the people, so that no enlightened thought remained in the country. Different religions, such as Jewish, Christian, Z & M, were in that country. All were in the utmost enmity and hatred with each other. They considered each other unclean, impure and unfit to associate with, and each considered himself near to the threshold of God. They would persecute and annoy each other on every opportunity, especially the various sects of Mohammedans, who were bitterly opposed to each other. They used to blaspheme, curse and vilify each other, hoping by this means to secure Divine Favour. All were in the utmost ignorance and darkness. It was at such a time that his Holiness the Bab appeared. He gave the glad tidings and prepared the people for the coming of the Sun of Reality. His appearance was in accordance with the explicit texts of the Blessed Books. He was 24 years of age and a descendant of the prophet Mohammad, and he was from a merchant family. He was well known for his nobility of character, piety, reverence and good morals. He effected a miracle beyond one's power of realisation. For 6 years he created a great commotion in P. He freed the minds from the bonds of imitation. In both Arabic and Persian he adduced proofs of religious truth in a way that attracted the hearts of old and young, learned and ignorant. A great multitude were illumined through his **[BSB 5]** teachings, and like lovers were ready to give their lives in his path. The Govt. of the time in conjunction with Mollahs, who were extremely powerful and influential, arose against the cause, with the firm determination to annihilate it. During those 6 years, they persecuted and martyred the believers to the utmost of their ability.

They killed great numbers in Teh., Fars, Mazanderan, Zanjan, and other places, until at last, in 1266, with the consent of the Mollahs and the command of the Govt., he was martyred in Tabriz. From that time the Govt. firmly pursued a policy of annihilating the Bābīs. Put to death in great numbers. They imprisoned the B.B. [Blessed Beauty]. He had four months of rigorous imprisonment, and after that the Govt. sent him under escort to Bagdad. B.b [sic] was at Bagdad for 12 years and he began to guide and educate the people. Then the Govts. of P.& T. exiled him with several of his followers to Constantinople., and thence to Adrianople and after 5 years to the fortress of Acca. The tidings and prophecies of the Holy Books were fulfilled concerning the Holy Land and the appearance of the Sun of Reality. The Sun of Reality shone from his various places of sojourn, and at last from Acca illumined the world. His Words, Teachings and Light began to illumine the East and the West, until in 1309 A.H. [1892] he passed away at Acca.

OBJECTIONS OF PEOPLE

The objections of Govt. and the people to this Cause exceeded their opposition to any other. Although at the time of appearance of previous Manifestations of God, there has always been opposition, in this case it was greater than ever. Why? Because the power and influence of the religious leaders were so great that the people believed that to oppose them would be to oppose God. Whatever command they would give to anyone, even to the King, no one dared to disobey. The Mollahs themselves gave the order that this sect must be exterminated, their property confiscated, and even their wives, and they are to be regarded as infidels. The Govt. with the utmost of power joined with the M.s [Mollahs]. Houses were pillaged and destroyed. Women were seized and carried off. Moslem fathers would kill their own sons and sons their fathers. Many were beheaded, hanged, blown from the mouths of cannon, burnt, chopped to pieces, but the spiritual power and firmness was such that notwithstanding these afflictions, the fire of the cause burned brighter and brighter. Although now the opposition has

become less, yet a certain amount of opposition still exists. For instance, not long ago, the martyrdom of Mirza Ali Akbar and his family in about 1916 at Sultanabad.

[BSB 6]

A.A. [ʿAlī Akbar] had two sons studying at school. These were very spiritual. One day the head of the school saw that these two boys were late. He sent the school servant after them. The servant went and knocked and knocked but got no answer. He pushed the door open. He called, no answer. Inside the door was a curtain, he pulled that aside and looked in. He saw those two boys with their throats cut, one at each side of the room. He cried out in horror and people gathered. A crowd of people entered. The sister of A.A.'s wife, who was about to be married, was found in a corner with her throat cut. Then the crowd went into the room. They saw that the table was set for a meal. They found the wife of A.A. with her throat cut. A tiny baby was found with its head wrenched off from its body, lying on the breast of its mother. Another young son of A.A. was found in the room with his throat cut. They could find no trace of A.A. himself. They went into the stable, and found him there with his throat cut and a knife wound in his chest. A door had been laid on top of him. In the house they found a basin of blood-stained water where the murderers had washed their hands.

The friends got to know of the affair and came and washed the bodies and buried them in the house. Before burying them they took photograph's of the bodies. Both the Baha'is and the Govt. tried to find who the murderers were but failed. This was the last of the Bah'ā martyrdoms in Persia.

SPREAD OF THE BAHĀ'Ī CAUSE IN PERSIA.

From one end of Persia to the other numbers of Bahais are to be found in every Persian town. In cities, towns and villages, among the nomad tribes, gatherings of Bahais are regularly held, and the wheels of the cause are moving. There is

not a village or hamlet where the Bahais are not to be found. The meetings in different localities vary considerably. In some villages the whole population is Bahai. In other the Bahais form either a majority or a minority. In all places, however, there are regular meetings, Mashrekol-Azkars and pilgrim houses. Even in villages there are special schools for both boys and girls. For over seventy years this movement has been inculcating the idea that schools are necessary. The Holy Places belonging to the Cause are kept in good repair (e.g. the Bāb's house in Shiraz, the place of the martyrs in Abadah, and Sheikh Tabarsi in Mazanderan). Among every class of people in every locality the Bahais are working for the Cause. The reason is that Baha'u'llah has commanded that all the Bahais without exception must work for the promulgation of the Cause. Whosoever becomes a Baha's must bring to the Cause one or several others. Besides, there are regular teachers who travel about. In most of the towns there are special meetings who are seeking after the truth of the Cause. On special occasions **[BSB 7]** conferences are held to discuss means of spreading the Cause among outsiders. This is why the Bahai Cause in every locality is increasing day by day. The ignorant people, having emerged from their superstitions, draw nearer to the Cause day by day.

On 14 November 1919, Esslemont had a conversation with Ibn-i Aşdaq during the course of which he took some notes. `Alī-Muḥammad was the son of Mullā Muhammad Şadīq-i Muqaddas, who was given the title Ismu'llāh al-Aşdaq. He was born in 1267/1850-51 in Mashhad. He travelled extensively with his father teaching the Bahā'ī Faith and also travelled to `Akkā to meet Bahā'u'llāh. After the death of his father, he continued to travel throughout Iran. In about 1886, he was named one of the Hands of the Cause. After the passing of Bahā'u'llāh he began a series of travels to other countries for the purpose of propagating the Bahā'ī Faith. He visited Ishqabad and Marv in Turkestan, Iraq, and travelled extensively in India. In Iran he was responsible for establishing

teaching classes for women and he was in contact with some of the notables of Iran with regard to the Bahā'ī Faith. He was a member of the Central Spiritual Assembly of Tihiran. He visited Haifa on several occasions during the ministry of `Abdu'l-Bahā. He died in 1929. In the following notes that were taken from Esslemont have used square brackets to increase clarity:

"Today no movement [is] more influential than [the] Bahai [movement] on [the] spiritual, social, and material progress of Persia.

[There are two] classes of people [in Persia].

1. [Those who] lack knowledge and appreciation of anything that is good.
2. Real truth-seekers-either after (a) material or (b) spiritual progress.

Many of 2b who were thinkings of [the] world beyond looked upon [the] Cause as the way of salvation, but as long as the Govt. and the priesthood were against the Movt. they could not openly identify themselves with it. Now however this opposition has been removed and these people have openly avowed the Cause. Now that the Cause has become so powerful, even those who seek after material progress favour development along Bahai lines.

The Cause has not only spread in important centres but even in remote villages and corners. The power of the opposition has steadily declined since the declaration of the Constitution (1906). During the Great War it rapidly vanished. The Persian parliament was dissolved about 20 months ago. In case it is in accordance with British Policy, it will be revised.

[BSB 8]

This war has submerged the opposition of the clergy- bigger issues claimed attention. In the early days of the Constitution two Representatives - Sheikh Ali from Mazandaran and Sheikh Hosein came to see Ebn Astag. They said: "We

have been sent by Parliament to put certain questions to you. At present there are two main opposing parties in the [Parliament]-Constitutionalist and Absolutist. Both say that the Bahais side with them. We have been sent to investigate to which party you really belong. We have come to you as a representative Bahai."

E.A. [Ibn-i Aşdaq] replied: "In case you ask any reasonable person whether if a man becomes sick a doctor should be consulted, undoubtedly he will reply yes. It would be foolish, however, to rely on a doctor who does not know his business. The foundation of our Cause is justice, equity, service and harmony. We do not consider the present delegates to be real physicians." They left.

They Came again and said: "We have presented your answer to the Chamber. Some smiled and seemed to like it." The two emissaries began to talk. He gave them a copy of the "Mysterious Forces of Civilization." ⁴ (4) About one third of it he read to them at his house. This led gradually to their conversion and they became Baha'is. One of them attained martyrdom at Resht two years later.

The result has been that intelligent members of Parliament used to come to Bah'ās and ask their advice.

Bahais since the war can print and publish books freely and hold public meetings without restriction. The Govt. recognises that the Bahai Movt. is not opposed to Islam. In Teheran alone there are 10,000 Bahais. There is no meeting place big enough to hold them all. [The] popn. of Teheran [is] 750,000. In Persia [there are] 2 or 3 million Bahais. Popn. 10-15 million.

Khorassan- villages where whole popn. is Bahai. In Espahan places where 2/3 are Bahais. In Azerbaijan, villages where 1/2 are Bahais.

About 18 months ago in Teheran at the house of Imam-juma, 5 or 6 people had gathered. He said: Generally when 5 or 6 people gather together at least two or

Bahais but here there are no Bahais, so let us talk freely about the movement. At that one of those present said "Pardon me, but I am a Bahai, and I am not the only Bahai present, so here also there are at least two Bahais."

At the celebration of Rizwan, [there are] 3 separate gatherings with over 1000 people at each [are held].

[BSB 9]

The last item regarding Iran among the materials collected by Esslemont is a list headed "Bahai Meetings in Teheran". This was a list gathered as a result of a talk with `Azīzu'llāh Khān Varqā. He was the son of `Alī Muḥammad Varqā who was martyred in 1896. He accompanied `Abdu'l-Bahā on his Western journey. He was one of the prominent Bahā'īs of Iran and died a few weeks after the passing of `Abdu'l-Bahā. The following, although said to be a list of the Bahā'ī meetings in Tihiran, is in fact a list of committees, classes and meetings:

BAHĀ'Ī MEETINGS IN TEHERAN

1. Spiritual Assembly - elected every two years. Meets once a week regularly and more often if necessary.
2. Mahfele Islah - for adjustment and arbitration of differences (commercial or material). A committee appointed by the Spiritual Assembly. Number of members varies. Members appointed for 2 years. Meets weekly. Sometimes oftener.
3. Education Committee - also appointed by S.A. - for management of Baha'i schools.

4. Poor Relief Committee (Welfare Committee). Contributions are invited once a year-oftener if necessary. All these Committees are appointed by the S.A. and meet once a week-oftener if necessary.

5. Teachers' Committee. All Baha'i teachers meet once a week to discuss methods and arrangements for teaching. Receives reports from all meetings for teaching.

6. Committee for Baha'i teaching of Young Children. Special courses of lessons are arranged for presenting the Baha'i teachings to children of different ages. This assembly receives reports from the various Bah'ā schools.

6a. Classes for training teachers - systematic exposition of Books of Ighan, Akdas, Answered Questions etc. How to answer questions of enquirers etc.

7. Hospitality Committee - arranges for hospitality to Baha'i visitors to the city.

8. Committee of East and West newly established by `Abdu'l-Baha especially for correspondance with Bah'ās in other countries.

9. Committee for Publishing and spreading Tablets amongst both Baha'is and non-Baha'is.

10. Meetings for Bahais only - for social intercourse, chanting tablets.

11. Meetings for Enquirers - usually small-10-15 or more or less-informal talks, questions and answerers. Over 30 of these meetings held each night.

12. Large public meetings - not held regularly-questions always invited.

13. 19-Day Feasts.

[BSB 10]

14. Meetings for dealing with hypocrites or people who do not live up to their professions - Fazel Mazanderani)

The last item, number 14, was evidently added to the list by Fāḍil-i-Māzandarānī who was also in Haifa during the time that Esslemont was there. ⁵ [\(5\)](#)

The Spiritual Assembly referred to in the above list was in fact called the Central Spiritual Assembly or the Tihrah Spiritual Assembly. It simultaneously dealt with the local affairs of the Tihrah Bahā'ī community as well as having overall supervision of national affairs. This body grew out of the Council of Hands of the Cause that was convened on `Abdu'l-Bahā's instructions shortly after the passing of Bahā'u'llāh. It continued until the election of the first National Spiritual Assembly in 1934. It is interesting to see that in a country not noted for efficient administration, the Bahā'īs had achieved a fair degree of sophistication at such an early date.

ENDNOTES

¹ `Abdu'l-Bahā appears to have suggested that Esslemont's original manuscript for the book be shortened (see Momen, Dr. J. E. Esslemont, 18-19). This chapter may have been dropped on account of this but, in fact, some of the material for the proposed chapter is dated after Esslemont's return from Haifa. Therefore it would seem that he was continuing to collect material at this time.

² These persons were all in Haifa during Esslemont's pilgrimage there (see Momen, Dr. J.E. Esslemont, 14)..

³ Two extracts from this "Diary" were published in *Star of the West* Vol.I0, No. II (27 Sep. 1919) 216-220 and Vol.II. No.3 (28 Apr.1920) 48-54.

⁴ The Secret of Divine Civilization by `Abdu'l-Bahā.

⁵ Mīrza Asadu'llāh, known as Fāḍil-i Māzandarānī was converted to the Bahā'ī Faith as a young man having had an education in the traditional Islamic sciences. In 1909, `Abdu'l-Bahā sent him on a mission to Mullā Muḥammad-Kāẓim Khurāsānī, the *marja` al-taqlīd* in Najaf. His other travels include over 3 years spent in the U.S.A., one year in India and also journeys to Caucasia and Turkistan. He is the author of the nine-volume history of the Bah'ā Faith called *Zuhūr al-ḥaqq*. He died in 1957.
