

ESSLEMONT'S SURVEY OF THE BAHA'I COMMUNITY IN 1919-1920:
Part VII: Iraq by Mirza Muhammad Husayn Wakil
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Although the name of Iraq is not included in the rough outline for the chapter that exists in Dr. Esslemont's hand-writing[1], there is nevertheless a brief type-written account of the Baha'i Faith in Iraq among the papers in this collection. The author of this brief account is notified in a statement in the hand-writing of Esslemont: "The following account of the Cause in Mesopotamia was kindly supplied to me by Mirza Mohamad Hosein Wakil who for the last quarter of a century has been care-taker of the house of Baha'u'llah at Bagdad".

Mirza Muhammad Husayn Wakil (or in Persianised form: Wakil) was the son of Mirza Muhammad Wakil who had become a Babi in the days when Baha'u'llah was in Baghdad. Mirza Muhammad had remained in Baghdad and been one of those exiled from Baghdad to Mosul, where he died in about 1882[2]. His son Mirza Muhammad Husayn had been appointed custodian of the House of Baha'u'llah in Baghdad. He remained the custodian of this place of pilgrimage until 1922 when the property was seized at the instigation of the Shi'is of Baghdad, the beginning of a case that eventually came before the League of Nations. After this Mirza Muhammad Husayn moved to Alexandria for a time.

The following then is the account of Mirza Muhammad Husayn Wakil:

MESOPOTAMIA

When the Blessed Beauty was sent to Constantinople in 1863 some 14 or 15 Bahai families remained in Bagdad, but five years later these also were exiled to Mozul[3], in a more northerly region of Mesopotamia, so that there remained in Bagdad only a few believers who kept their faith secret. After remaining about twelve years in Mosul, the believers gradually left that neighbourhood. Several went on to Acca, remaining either in Acca or in places near the Holy Land, such as Alexandretta and Beyrouth. About ten or twelve families again took up their residence in Bagdad. Soon after these believers returned, the Blessed Beauty sent money to purchase the house where he had lived in Bagdad. The purchase was effected in the name of a Turkish believer named Haji Mohamad Hosain Hakim, as the government would not allow the place to be sold to a Persian. The house is now visited by all Baha'is passing through Bagdad to the Holy Land or elsewhere.

1. See Baha'i Studies Bulletin, Vol. 1, No.1, p.3
2. See 'Abdu'l-Baha, Memorials of the Faithful (translated Marzieh Gail), p. 108-116
3. Mosul; see Momen, The Babi and Baha'i Religions, pp. 265-7

After their return to Bagdad the believers had still to put up with a great deal of opposition and petty persecution on account of their faith. On one occasion five of them were stripped of all their possessions and again exiled to Mozul for about 10 months.

As long as the Turkish regime lasted in Mesopotamia, the believers were forbidden to teach the cause, not only by the Government but also by Abdul Baha himself. Because of their sterling character, cleanliness, trustworthiness and godliness, however, many people were attracted to them and they gradually increased in numbers. During the Great War of 1914-1918, a good many of the believers were killed, but with the overthrow of the Turkish government, the cause in Bagdad entered a new era. In December, 1918, Abdul baha wrote a Tablet for the believers in Mesopotamia containing the longed-for permission to teach. He wrote:- "If ye come across a person who may hearken to the call and whose ears are are responsive, declare to him the Word of God, for verily t is sufficient and convincing." He added moreover that the teaching must still be given cautiously and with prudence. The effect of this call was immediately apparent. When it arrived the believers in Bagdad and the surrounding villages numbered about a hundred to a hundred and twenty men and women, but in less than a year that number was nearly doubled and great firmness and enthusiasm prevailed. They are planning to build a Mashrkol-Azkar and are desirous of starting a Bahai library as soon as circumstances permit. Outside the Bagdad district there is only one other small Bahai group in Mesopotamia, in the town of Basra, but there seems every reason to hope that with the removal of the old restrictions the Movement will now make rapid progress.

The Garden of Rizwan, outside Bagdad, where Baha'u'llah made his memorable declaration is now in the hands of the British Government which is using it as a Hospital site.

Among Esslemont's papers, there is also the typed record of a talk that he heard from Muhammad Husayn Wakil at Haifa on 3 December 1919. This talk repeats much of the same information as the account given above and may indeed have been the source of it. The following represents the only passage from this account that does not repeat information already given above:

MESOPOTAMIA...

.... After about 12 years gradually the believers left Mozul. Some went with Jenab Zaini^[4] to Acca. The others returned to Bagdad, and from there many of them proceeded to Acca, remaining either in Acca or in places near the Holy Land such as Alexandretta. Amongst those was Jenab Mohammad Mostafa Bagdadi, the father of Dr. Bagdadi, who came to

4. Zaynu'l-Muqarrabin, a Baha'i from Najafabad who acted as a transcriber of Baha'u'llah's Tablets

reside at Beyrout, and later by command of the Master went to Alexandretta, where he passed away. Mirza M.H.W.'s [Muhammad Husayn Wakil's] mother came to Acca (and afterwards Haifa) and lived with the Holy Family, being the nurse of Shoghi Efendi. During the war she went to Alexandretta to see her daughters, but means of commn. [communication] were stopped and she was unable to return. She passed away at Alex.[andretta] from grief at separation from Shoghi!

When the B.B. [Blessed Beauty] was at Bagdad, he gave M.H.W.'s father the name of Wakil (agent)[5]. On his return from Mosul F.[ather of Muhammad Husayn Wakil] went from Bagdad to India, then returned to Mosul, passing away about two years after first leaving Mozul...

...Until 6 months ago, the injunction not to teach remained in force. At that time the Bahais numbered 100 to 120 men and women. now those who are firm in the faith and are ready to give their lives for it number over 200. During the war a good many of the believers were killed. Some were Turks and had to join the army. With the bounty and assistance of the Beloved Master, each of the believers is now like a shining star. Haji Mohamad Hosein[6] was exiled to Mozul by the Turkish Govt. about 25 years ago, for a second time. M.H.W. was at that time in Acca visiting the Master. The M.[aster] told him to go to Bagdad via Mozul and get the key of the house from M.H. He did so, and has since remained in charge of the house. He and his relations have lived near. No one lives in the house itself. Pilgrims who go to Haifa and Acca visit the house, in accordance with the command of B.[aha'u'llah] in the Book of Akdas.. The Master says that teaching must still be done with cautiousness and wisdom. The people of Bagdad wanted to start a library, but the Master said the time for that has not yet come. The Master has instructed Mirza Mehdi of Resht to see to the repair of the House of God, along with M.H.W.

The Garden of Rizwan is now in the hands of the British Govt. who have a hospital there, which was erected 15 or 20 years ago.

At Bassera [Basra], about 8 days S.E. of Bagdad, there are 2 or 3 Bahais]

5. This conflict with the account given by 'Abdu'l-Baha in Memorials of the Faithful, pp. 108-115

6. Haji Muhammad Husayn Hakim the purchaser of the House of Baha'u'llah is evidently meant