

BAHÁ'Í PERSECUTIONS IN PERSIA

An Appeal Addressed to

HIS IMPERIAL MAJESTY REZA SHÁH PAHLAVÍ

by the

NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY OF THE BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE
UNITED STATES AND CANADA

[The following letter has been published in the faith that widespread publicity at this time will end forever the bitter persecutions still inflicted upon the Bahá'ís of Persia by their fanatical religious enemies. This implacable opposition to enlightenment, maintained almost without interruption for eighty years has been possible only through the isolation of Persia from the general progress of the world. Signs indicate a complete breakdown of the mental and social medievalism of that once notable people, even now more secluded from the West in many ways than Thibet, and their final liberation from an oppressive orthodoxy which has not only caused the martyrdom of twenty thousand Bahá'ís, but stifled the very life of the land. When the veil of this seclusion is lifted, and the true history of modern Persia becomes known, it will be seen that the Vital Spiritual Drama has been repeated on that darkened stage, and that the mighty figures of Love and Wisdom and Sacrifice have once more moved among men. Mutely, yet with a most terrible eloquence, the Bahá'ís of Persia have been telling in their suffering and death the immortal story of man's devotion to the living God. If the result of their voluntary martyrdom is to turn the minds and hearts of the American people toward the Source of their radiant faith—Bahá'u'lláh—then this history of unequalled persecution will at last have been fulfilled.—EDITORS.]

Reza Sháh Pahlaví, His Imperial Majesty,
Imperial Palace, Tíhrán, Persia.

YOUR MAJESTY:

Moved by the cruel persecutions being inflicted upon the Bahá'ís of Persia, we address this petition to the supreme authority of that land, confident that when all the facts are assembled, the conditions realized and the consequences understood, your Majesty will straightway initiate whatever measures are necessary to terminate this long and frightful chapter of unmerited woe.

Recent Cases of Murder and Pillage

The latest example of the extreme suf-

fering endured by Persian Bahá'ís, brought to our attention through sources of unquestionable accuracy, was in the outbreak of public violence which took place in the town of Jahrum on April 7th last. On that day eight Bahá'ís were tortured and slain under circumstances of unbelievable brutality. The names of these innocent victims are: Siyyid Húsayn Rúhání, Ostad 'Abbás, Muḥammad Kázim, Muḥammad Hassan, Muḥammad Sháfí, Mashhadí 'Abbás, Ostad Muḥammad Hassan and Muḥammad Riza. In addition to those murdered outright, many others were severely wounded, and some twenty homes overrun and looted

or burned to the ground. Among the atrocious acts committed in the same town we must record also the slaughter of Bahá'í women in the most shameful manner, and the cutting into pieces of the body of a Bahá'í child by the pitiless criminal's knife.

The survivors of such fanatical outbreaks are perhaps more deeply to be pitted even than those who suffered martyrdom by fire and sword. Against them are closed all doors of mercy, of justice, even of the most elemental human association in any form. The civil authorities deny them the rights and privileges of the law of the land and all protection of local and provincial courts; the chiefs of Islám pronounce association with them a violation of the principles of the religion of Muḥammad; they are prevented from having access to shops which supply the daily necessities of existence; their homes, their property and their persons are abandoned to the will of the insane mob or of the worst criminal element in the community. Such are the conditions existing today in the town of *Marághih*, in the province of *Ádhirbáyján*, of your realm.

To recount the sufferings of the Persian Bahá'ís in detail, hundreds of pages would be required. Suffice it for the moment, to state that twenty of these unfortunate people have been slain within the past few weeks, while three were murdered during the previous year, with fanatical outbreaks more particularly in the towns of *Qamsar* and *Fárán* and the provinces of *Fárs*, *Yazd* and *Khurásán*. The anti-Bahá'í incidents preceding the assassination of Vice-Consul Major Robert W. Imbrie in the streets of *Tihrán* are becoming well known to the American people, through the extensive newspaper publicity following that unhappy but significant case.

If the slightest doubt should arise as to the number or grave character of these anti-Bahá'í outrages in Persia, we are prepared to file the complete record with any suitable authority your Majesty may care to name. The essence of the matter

is this: at this very hour, under your Majesty's rule, just as has been the case for more than eighty years under preceding sovereigns, the life of a Bahá'í in Persia is bereft of all those sanctions and guarantees which are written into the law of every civilized nation, and adhered to as a moral code even by peoples who have not developed to the state of formal law. The Persian Bahá'ís at any moment are subject to such shameful violence as hunters would not inflict upon beasts of prey.

The astonishing record of the martyrdoms undergone by the Báb and His followers, and by those who later acknowledged the spiritual leadership of Bahá'u'lláh, is extant in the libraries of America and Europe in the works of well-known scholars such as the late Professor Browne of Cambridge University, the late Baron Rosen of Petrograd, and Comte de Gobineau of France. The leading humanitarians and independent thinkers of the West are cognizant of the fact that in Persia during the past eighty years there has occurred the most heroic expression of the religious spirit which has glorified humanity for hundreds, perhaps for thousands of years. Animated by invincible faith, more than twenty thousand men, women and children have during that period of time voluntarily yielded up their lives to promote the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh.

Religious Freedom Guaranteed

If from local and provincial authorities, and from the religious leaders as well, the general justification has been attempted that the Bahá'ís individually and collectively are dangerous to the public welfare and their extermination a service to the people and state, we must be permitted to ask by what authority has their case been tried? Under what conditions has it been established beyond the right of appeal, that a Bahá'í as such is synonymous with a vital menace to Persia—nay, apparently, a menace to mankind? For every species of criminal, no matter how vile, the law assigns methods of trial and degrees of punishment. When

did the supreme court of Persia, despite the fact that religious freedom is guaranteed by the Persian Constitution, make an exception in the case of the Bahá'ís?

We know full well that according to the universal standards of morality, the Persian Bahá'ís are not merely the peers, they are indisputably the superiors, of their fellow countrymen. The Persian Bahá'ís are truthful and industrious. They are progressive and public spirited. They value highly the benefits of scientific and industrial as well as cultural and religious education. They recognize the equality of men and women. They are bound by the explicit text of their religion to be loyal to the head of their national government and to take part in no movements of sedition. Since the individual Bahá'í cannot be condemned according to the prevailing moral or civil standard, and the Bahá'ís collectively cannot be proved ever to have arisen against the government, it must be that those responsible for their persecution assert that the Bahá'í Faith itself, independent of the lives and actions of its adherents, contains some dreadful taint, some mysterious evil, the stamping out of which is required by Divine law!

Should this species of vindication be put forward—this condoning of theft, arson, pillage, torture and murder on the part of officials and clergy as though sanctioned by the Will of God—then we assert that either no effort has been made by its enemies to understand the principles of this Faith, or those who occupy the seats of religious authority in Persia can no longer discriminate between right and wrong, good and evil, truth and falsehood.

Bahá'í Principles and Doctrines

The principles and doctrines of the Bahá'í Cause are not subject to changing interpretation according to individual caprice or the self-interest of any special group. These teachings are to be found in the writings of Bahá'u'lláh, together with the interpretations of 'Abdu'l-Bahá

—and exist in no other source. For the sake of brevity, 'Abdu'l-Bahá summarized the essential objects and teachings of this Faith as follows:

[SEE APPENDIX ONE AT THE CONCLUSION OF THIS LETTER]

Brief though it be, the foregoing statement of the principles and doctrines of the Bahá'í Faith is quite sufficient to reveal its comprehensive character, its noble purpose and its pure spirit. What conscientious minister or priest of any religion; what statesman of any country; what responsible man of affairs; what scientist or thinker, could assert that loyalty to such teachings threatens the true welfare of any person or group? By what logic can these principles be claimed a form of heresy to any Divine law or treason to any just government?

Nevertheless, the Persians themselves, save only the Persian Bahá'ís, still ignore the greatness that came into their midst, repudiate the principles of true progress and civilization so lovingly offered them, and even decide that the followers of this Faith, irrespective of their personal morality and civic virtue, are deserving of the most implacable hate, the most relentless hostility, the most inhuman death!

Outline of Bahá'í History

To consider now the circumstances under which Persia gave birth to a Cause destined to influence the entire world: On May 23, 1844, a youth of the pure lineage of Muḥammad arose in Shiráz and proclaimed a new spiritual mission. This personage, known as the Báb, based His mission upon truth and fact in exact conformity with the Qur'án of the Prophet Muḥammad. The essence of the Báb's teaching was that He proclaimed the coming of One who would be the World Educator foretold in all the Holy Books. He asserted that true loyalty to the Prophet must now consist in awaiting the coming of that One and in preparations for loyalty and obedience to Him. This

proclamation produced an immediate far-reaching effect in Persia, attracting many thousands of faithful souls but also creating frantic opposition among the leaders of Islám. Their hatred, in alliance with the power of the government in Tíhrán, brought about the martyrdom of this radiant Spirit at Tabríz, July 9, 1850.

Far from extinguishing the light of this new Faith, the cruel execution of the Báb resulted in a great increase in the number and loyalty of His adherents. As the ecclesiastics continued to inflame the civil authorities and the ignorant populace, scenes of indescribable barbarism took place in the public streets and squares of cities and towns throughout the land. Thousands of helpless, inoffensive men, women and children perished under the sword of the executioner, or the knives, stones and clubs of the maddened mob. Some of these Bahá'ís were blown from the mouth of cannon; others were scourged through crowded streets and, as in the case of the glorious martyr Sulaymán Khán, lighted candles placed in their bleeding wounds. Thus was paid the price of a new spirit of hope and love brought to earth in this age!

No attention need any longer be paid to that apparent confusion in the internal affairs of the Cause of God following the Báb's martyrdom. His followers needed and sought a leader able to unite their moral forces, instruct their minds and point out their spiritual duties under the difficult conditions obtaining throughout the country. Several claimants arose, but He who alone fulfilled the conditions and met the opportunities was Mírzá H̄usayn 'Alí, eldest son of a family of exalted rank in the realm, known to history as Bahá'u'lláh.

Bahá'u'lláh offered Himself as the target for all the blows aimed at the helpless Bábís; assumed all responsibility as their leader in the eyes of the government, was imprisoned under heavy chains for their sake in Tíhrán, bastinadoed, stripped of property and rights, banished to Baghdád with His family, then suc-

cessively exiled to Constantinople, to Adrianople and finally condemned to life-imprisonment in the barracks of pestilential 'Akká, the Turkish penal colony, situated at the foot of Mount Carmel in Palestine.

The rulers of Persia and of Turkey were associated together in this sentence of exile and imprisonment, acting to put down a movement whose inner power they recognized but whose meaning they could not understand. But the spiritual mission of Bahá'u'lláh could not be eclipsed by any material opposition. Serenely, under the shadow of death, He completed the Book of His religion, and while suffering the treatment of slaves and criminals, predicted the overthrow of both those dynasties conspiring against His Cause. And, as your Majesty so well knows, that which He foretold has come to pass. Students of the Christian and Jewish Scriptures who have become cognizant of the facts concerning the exile and imprisonment of Bahá'u'lláh recognize that these events fulfill their most glorious prophecy, even as the martyrdom of the Báb fulfilled the prophecy of the Qur'án.

Who, even now, can read unmoved the noble words uttered by Bahá'u'lláh in the famous letters sent forth from His prison to the Sultán and the Sháh?—

[SEE APPENDIX TWO AT THE CONCLUSION OF THIS LETTER]

As history has recorded, these letters were written more than fifty years ago.

Today the Epistles and Books of Bahá'u'lláh are held in grateful reverence by uncounted thousands of devoted followers throughout the world. In them they have found a source of unity and fellowship overcoming every difference of creed, language, custom and tradition. The Books of Bahá'u'lláh create in hearts the reality of human oneness and the spirit of peace, burning away the veils of indifference, misunderstanding, antagonism and fear. They uphold the doctrine

of the oneness of God in its universality by revealing the identical mission and power in the origin of all the religions. They bring new assurance as to the mercy and love of God for man, and new confirmation of man's spiritual destiny. The essence of all the Holy Books of the past returns in this Word, stripped of those particular allusions and expressions inevitable under the restrictions of former times. Whoever truly loves any Manifestation of God, whether Muḥammad, Moses, Zoroaster or Christ, will surely turn to Bahá'u'lláh in joyous devotion, as to the only One capable of bringing his most cherished ideals to fruition in this unsettled, dangerous yet glorious age.

Foremost among those who have served the Cause of Bahá'u'lláh and increased the proofs of its spiritual truth, is His eldest son, 'Abdu'l-Bahá.

It was as a child of eight years that 'Abdu'l-Bahá began to walk in the path of that Light. From city to city and from prison to prison He accompanied Bahá'u'lláh, taught only by Him, inspired by Him to continue the mission when the physical body of Bahá'u'lláh must at length be no more. Yet, though confinement and oppressive hardship had been His lot for more than fifty years, when 'Abdu'l-Bahá journeyed through Europe and America there was not one to match the ardor of His humanitarian service, nor the penetration of His mind into the essential problems of human life. His voice most clearly sounded the call of religious unity and brotherhood—His warning most courageously foretold the coming World War and pointed out what steps must be taken to avert a complete overthrow of civilization, East and West.

He came not as the representative of any institution, the exponent of any creed, the ambassador of any nation, the defender of any race. Rather did this Personage come as one sent from the very Kingdom of God, and His thoughts, manners, purposes and methods—above all, His intense love for every fellow-man—reflected into

humanity the conditions of a higher realm. Though limited human beings cannot honor One from the world of Spirit, nevertheless even according to ordinary standards, such honor was bestowed upon 'Abdu'l-Bahá as no Persian ever received in the Occident during the memory of man.

By reason of the predominance of Greek thought upon modern education in the West, Persia for hundreds of years has been viewed through the eyes of Greek historians and writers, with the result that your Majesty's nation and people have been victims of instinctive prejudice. By many, Persia would be associated with the idea of complete decadence and corruption, while others would recall the menace of military invasion prevented by the famous victories of Salamis and Marathon. In addition to this burden of prejudice, Persia has also suffered grievously from the antagonism felt by many Christian leaders for every Muslim country. Before 'Abdu'l-Bahá journeyed to the West, it would have been difficult even to imagine any influence powerful enough to lift this burden from Persia and replace long-established contempt with sympathy and respect.

Persia Honored in the West

But in 'Abdu'l-Bahá, Europe and America learned to honor Persia as the source of true wisdom and love. Were the Persian people aware of what He accomplished in their behalf, they would hasten to raise monuments in His name and seek to acquaint themselves with His truth. Instead of that, the Persians, like wolves, are actually tearing to pieces those among them who testify that Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá lived only to serve mankind. One of the teachings of Bahá'u'lláh definitely attributes special glory to Persia as the center of devotion for Bahá'ís of all lands. Should not all patriotic Persians appreciate this as the greatest tribute ever paid their land?

The journey undertaken by 'Abdu'l-Bahá throughout the United States in 1912 assumes year by year a larger mean-

ing and a profounder importance. During this journey the great Exemplar of the Bahá'í Faith turned the clear, radiant light of His spiritual wisdom upon the complexity of Western civilization. He made contact with all our problems, conditions and opportunities. Appreciating those memorable days, His American followers took steps to record permanently the addresses delivered by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in churches, synagogues, universities and other important institutions. The record of His journey survives in two volumes, published under the title suggested by Him: *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*. To read these words is to find the very essence of the solution of the sinister problems of war and peace, capital and labor, church and state, science and religion, so gravely menacing the world at this time.

Since 'Abdu'l-Bahá is the only Persian whose addresses to the West have gained wide influence and fame; and since it would be impossible to appreciate the full influence and meaning of the Bahá'í Faith apart from these two volumes, we take the liberty, your Majesty, of presenting copies of them to you in connection with this petition. Lack of space prevents us from informing you of another work of 'Abdu'l-Bahá wherein He deals specifically with the condition of Persia and suggests suitable methods and measures by which the Persian people can regain their ancient, their rightful position of eminence among the peoples of the world. A translation of this work has been published both in England and America; doubtless we can furnish a copy in the original Persian tongue, should we receive a request for the same.

'Abdu'l-Bahá passed from this world in 1921, a Light of international friendship and understanding that shall never die. Perhaps another decade must elapse before His wisdom becomes the source of inspiration of the majority of responsible statesmen and thinkers, but the outcome does not stand in doubt. Already a host of grateful people in all countries acknowledge His spiritual guidance, uni-

fied in the one world-movement raised above the reach of economic, political or religious factions. In Persia alone, the ranks of the Bahá'ís today include a considerable section of the population—especially among the most progressive minds—therefore one can appreciate the spiritual power able to make these people prefer death to violent resistance and human revenge. Let none believe that it has been through fear or weakness that the Bahá'ís of your realm have submitted to the injustice we have mentioned. They have entrusted their lives to God, and who dare assert that they have trusted in vain?

The following words written by 'Abdu'l-Bahá in a letter to American Bahá'ís nearly twenty years ago refer most significantly to Persia and its conditions:

[SEE APPENDIX THREE AT THE CONCLUSION OF THIS LETTER]

Conditions Indicate Anarchy

We have referred to the long period of time over which these dire persecutions have been spread. We have indicated also that the original antagonism for the Bábís and their successors, the Bahá'ís, emanated not from the mass of the people but from the chiefs of religion and state. Without their deliberate provocation and example, the people would never have become inflamed with the insane spirit of fanaticism and bloodshed. But once this dreadful example was set, the people throughout the land were quick to learn that one could rob, insult, strike, torture and slay a Bahá'í with impunity—nay, even with the approval of those in local positions of power. Therefore, by all too logical steps, conditions in Persia have come to the point where, if public agitation is wanted for any purpose, or ambitious leaders desire to divert attention from an issue, all that is necessary is for them to raise a hue and cry against the Bahá'ís, and behind the smoke of violence the agitators can work unseen. The condition is one of moral and civic anarchy, and if prolonged must seep higher and

higher into the structure of the central government until at last the supreme executive, to maintain himself, must become little better than a bandit chief. A patriot like your Majesty, who understands the basis of national order and stability, has surely viewed this problem of local government as one of supreme concern for the progress, for the very existence of the Persian state.

Very humbly, and as true friends of Persia, we suggest that the question of the Bahá'ís of your realm has become a vital issue no longer to be postponed or entrusted to prejudiced or incompetent hands. For the cruel treatment being inflicted upon this innocent people is becoming the cause of absolute anarchy and disregard of law. Not until your loyal Bahá'í subjects receive full justice and protection will these negative forces be successfully resisted, which will otherwise lead to the total disintegration of civilized customs, manners and forms. When the supreme authority of Persia today reverses the example its predecessors set over seventy years ago, and protects the Bahá'ís resolutely instead of condoning their persecution, then at last can the process of anarchy and disintegration be checked, and the national government, the sole hope of any people, be placed on foundations able to endure.

It may well be that the case of the Persian Bahá'ís has become a vital issue in another direction as well.

Menace to Persia's Economic Development

Aware of the explicit statements made by 'Abdu'l-Bahá concerning the future of the relations between East and West, the Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada have long watched with the greatest interest the signs of an increasing intimacy between North America and Persia. We have felt keenly the need for a cordial association and mutual spirit of co-operation between these two lands and peoples, in order to offset by an example of international justice and true morality the grievous effects of that previous con-

tact of East and West so frequently founded on national or sectional greed. Is it not evident that Persia would benefit by direct financial co-operation from this country—enterprises of a non-political character intended to develop the natural resources of that economically undeveloped land? But the consummation of any plan of financial co-operation between our people and Persia is impossible until real stability has been effected in Persia itself, and those processes of justice and security have been realized which are absolutely necessary as guarantees that large economic developments can succeed. We have direct knowledge of one important enterprise recently abandoned by American interests for lack of these guarantees.

But such considerations are entirely secondary to our essential purpose, of requesting protection and justice for the Persian Bahá'ís on purely spiritual grounds. No other purpose could have induced us to take this unusual step of addressing a petition directly to a chief of state. It is because all the circumstances are extraordinary, and the issues supremely important, that we felt compelled to disregard ordinary custom and place this petition directly in your Majesty's hands. The news of your accession to the throne gave us great hope that Persia has now been blessed with a ruler not only firm but imbued with modern standards and ideals. We feel certain that your Majesty will appreciate the gravity of the case and determine to uphold the full responsibility of your exalted position as the founder of a new dynasty by hastening to suppress conditions of terror long crying to Divine Justice for amends.

Bahá'í Literature Confiscated

We express the hope that your Majesty will also decide that no useful end can any longer be served by the confiscation of Bahá'í magazines, literature and correspondence sent to Persia from this country, or by the banning of photographs of 'Abdu'l-Bahá. It is such Im-

perial regulations which serve indirectly to justify the atrocities committed by your subjects upon the Bahá'ís.

We await your Majesty's assurance that our respectful appeal has achieved its aim. Our love for these oppressed Bahá'í brothers and sisters makes it imperative that we continue our efforts to rescue them from their sea of calamity, until assured that henceforth they shall be protected by the full power of the Imperial Government, and just restitution made them for losses already sustained.

We transmit this petition in behalf of the Bahá'í Spiritual Assemblies of the United States and Canada as follows: Berkeley, Geyserville, Glendale, Los Angeles, Oakland, Pasadena, San Francisco and Visalia, *California*; Montreal, Quebec, *Canada*; Denver, *Colorado*; New Haven, *Connecticut*; Washington, *D. C.*; Miami, *Florida*; Honolulu, *Hawaiian Islands*; Chicago and Urbana, *Illinois*; Eliot, *Maine*; Baltimore, *Maryland*; Boston, Springfield and Worcester, *Massachusetts*; Detroit, Fruitport, Lansing and Muskegon, *Michigan*; Minneapolis, *Minnesota*; Montclair, Newark and West Englewood, *New Jersey*; Buffalo, Ge-

neva, New York City and Yonkers, *New York*; Akron, Cincinnati and Cleveland, *Ohio*; Portland, *Oregon*; Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh, *Pennsylvania*; Seattle, *Washington*; Kenosha, Milwaukee and Racine, *Wisconsin*;—and in behalf of the Bahá'í groups and meetings as follows: Clear Lake Highlands, Santa Barbara and San Diego, *California*; Toronto, Ontario and Vancouver, British Columbia, *Canada*; St. Augustine, *Florida*; Atlanta and Augusta, *Georgia*; Spracklesville, Maui, *Hawaiian Islands*; Keokuk, *Iowa*; Peoria and Springfield, *Illinois*; Haverhill and Somerville, *Massachusetts*; Duluth and St. Paul, *Minnesota*; Omaha, *Nebraska*; Asbury Park and Jersey City, *New Jersey*; Johnstown, Ithaca and Rochester, *New York*; Dayton and Sandusky, *Ohio*; and Spokane, *Washington*.

NATIONAL SPIRITUAL ASSEMBLY OF THE
BAHÁ'ÍS OF THE UNITED STATES AND
CANADA.

By HORACE HOLLEY, *Secretary*.

Green Acre, Eliot, Maine
July 16, 1926.