



'ALĀ'I, ŠO'Ā'-ALLĀH

'ALĀ'I, ŠO'Ā'-ALLĀH (1899-1984), prominent government official and a leading Bahai. Ḥosayn, known as Šo'ā'-Allāh (angl. Shu'á'u'lláh), 'Alā'i was born in Tehran on 16 November 1889, the son of Ẕadijeh Yazdi (known as Bibi-Jān) and Sayyed Moḥammad Nāzem-ol-Ḥokamā Lahijāni, a Muslim cleric who had converted to the Bahai Faith, moved to Tehran, switched to medicine, and become a physician to the royal guards (Solaymāni, vol. 3, pp. 266-381). 'Alā'i received his primary and secondary education at home and at the Tarbiyat School (see [BAHAISM X. BAHAI SCHOOLS](#)). Following in his father's footsteps, he entered the medical college of the *Dar-ol-Fonun* but, in spite of his father's wishes, soon gave up medicine and, being mathematically inclined, proceeded to study accounting. At the age of twenty-three, 'Alā'i married his cousin, Foruḡiyyeh 'Alā'i. They had five children: Hišmat, Mehrangiz, Behjat, Farhangiz, and Amir (S. 'Alā'i 1973, pp. 622-4; H. 'Alā'i, 2002, pp. 10-14).

Having completed his studies at the age of nineteen, 'Alā'i in 1907 entered government service in the Ministry of Commerce and Customs. In 1909, he was appointed by [Yeprem Khan](#) as head of the accounts department of the Tehran municipal authority and remained for five years. His capable management led to an increase in revenue from duties collected on opium and on goods entering the gates of Tehran. From 1914 to 1919, Ala'i served as treasurer of the Ministry of Justice, where he gained a reputation for efficiency, reliability, and probity rare among his contemporaries. In 1920 Ala'i was sent to Qazvin to supervise payment of arrears and wages to soldiers of the [Cossack Brigade](#), the government military force that was fighting the insurgency of Mirzā



Kuchek Kān. ‘Alā’i’s outstanding performance as paymaster won him the admiration and trust of the force’s commander, Reza Khan, who shortly thereafter, in February 1921, staged a coup d’état and took the post of Minister of War in the cabinet headed by Sayyed Żiyā’-od-Din Ṭabāṭabā’i (S. ‘Alā’i 1973, pp. 630-32; H. ‘Alā’i, 2002, pp. 14-19).

Striving to create a modern regular army, Reza Khan appointed ‘Alā’i its comptroller and chief financial officer with the rank of major. In that capacity, in 1923, he headed a mission to France for the purchase of military equipment and munitions for the reformed military forces. ‘Alā’i continued, with some interruptions, as the army’s chief financial officer for the next twenty-five years, reaching the rank of *sarlaškar* (major-general). One such interruption occurred when he was appointed director-general of finance in the Ministry of Post and Telegraph, which was undergoing extensive reorganization and modernization (1925-1930). The manuals that ‘Alā’i prepared for purchasing and financial regulation became the models for all government departments. Reluctantly obeying Reza Shah’s orders, ‘Alā’i, civilian to the bone, returned to the army in 1930 but simultaneously served on the boards of directors of the National Bank of Iran [Bānk-e Mellī-e Īrān; see [BANKING](#)] (from 1936) and, for some thirty years, the Sepāh (Army) Bank, of which he was a founder. When in 1936 Reza Shah, in his endeavors to preserve and maintain the standards of Persian carpet weaving, dissolved the foreign-owned and operated Eastern Carpet Manufacturing Company, the government established the Iran Carpet Company, and appointed ‘Alā’i its head. At the time of his appointment to the post of chief financial officer of the army, ‘Alā’i had informed Reza Khan that as a Baha’i he would not participate in any political activity. This only increased the confidence of Reza Khan and of other government personalities and agencies in his integrity and neutrality and led to his being frequently entrusted with particularly sensitive tasks, such as supervising the inventory of Iran’s crown jewels. Having served his country under five shahs, ‘Alā’i retired from government service in 1944, forced out because of a cleric-led outcry over his Bahai identity (S. ‘Alā’i, pp. 632-33; H. ‘Alā’i, 2002, pp. 19-22).

Both ‘Alā’i’s father, Sayyed Moḥammad, and his mother, Kādijeh, were devoted Bahais. Šo‘ā‘-Allāh was seven years old when he received a short letter from ‘Abd-ol-Baha’, expressing the wish that the boy would live up to the meaning of his name (God’s ray) and become a spreader of illumination in the world (S. ‘Alā’i 1973, p. 625; tr. H. ‘Alā’i, 1994, p. 593). This childhood experience, ‘Alā’i repeatedly stated, determined the direction of the rest of his life. He followed



the example of his parents, diligently serving the Baha’i community in Iran as well as abroad all his life. He studied the Bahai Faith with Mirza Ḥasan Adib Ṭālaqāni and ‘Aziz-Allāh Mesbāḥ. As early as at the age of eighteen he was made a member of an ad hoc committee established by the Hands of the Cause to conduct Baha’i meetings in Tehran and perform other administrative functions. He also served on the committee overseeing the Tarbiyat schools. In 1913 he was elected to the Spiritual Assembly of Tehran, the governing organ of the local Baha’i community, and he continued to serve on it for the next 30 years. In 1934, when the first National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha’is of Iran was established, ‘Alā’i became one of its members. He visited Haifa and met Shoghi Effendi, head of the Baha’i Faith, in 1952, after which he traveled on the latter’s instructions to Egypt, Sudan, and Iraq and conveyed some of the latter’s instructions to the Bahais of those countries (‘Alā’i, 1973, pp. 624-9; H. ‘Alā’i, 2002, pp. 23-26).

‘Alā’i’s administrative experience, broad vision, and the understanding of the wider social context in which the Baha’i community existed and was building its institutions contributed a great deal to their strength and viability. His knowledge of finance was of value in the management of Bahai properties, which included holy places, local and national administrative centers, schools, historic sites, and cemeteries. His military rank and access to the highest levels of government, where he was trusted and respected, allowed him on a number of occasions to prevent or mitigate clerical attacks on the Bahai community and to serve as an intermediary between that community and government authorities. With regard to his personality, ‘Alā’i was a serious-minded man with strict social and moral values (H. ‘Alā’i 2002, p. 12).

On 29 February 1952, Shoghi Effendi appointed Šo‘ā‘-Allāh ‘Alā’i as a Hand of the Cause of God (*Ayādi Amr Allāh*), the highest ranking position in the Baha’i community. In that capacity he was called upon to travel widely, visiting Baha’is in some thirty-five countries on every continent except Australia. In 1953, Ala’i attended four intercontinental conferences in Kampala, Wilmette, New Delhi and Stockholm. In 1957 he represented Shoghi Effendi at the inaugural Convention that elected the National Spiritual Assembly of Pakistan (H. ‘Alā’i, 1994, p. 594).

At the death of Shoghi Effendi in November 1957, the Baha’is were temporarily left without a central authority, since the elective governing body of the world Baha’i community, the Universal House of Justice, had not yet come into being. National Spiritual Assemblies entrusted the leadership of the



Baha’i world community to the Hands of the Cause. During the six years’ interregnum between the death of Shoghi Effendi and the election of the Universal House of Justice, ‘Alā’i, as a Hand of the Cause, participated in the management of the affairs of the Baha’i world community and traveled extensively, encouraging and advising Baha’i institutions and individuals. He continued to do so at the behest of the Universal House of Justice after its election in 1963. His greatest efforts, however, were exerted in Iran, where he supervised the difficult task of negotiating with the government of Iran over the fact that all of the Bahai properties in Iran that had been registered in the name of Shoghi Effendi were not his personal property and should not therefore be subject to inheritance tax (H. ‘Alā’i 2002, pp. 26-28).

The onset of the Islamic Revolution of 1979 made it necessary for ‘Alā’i, by then a very old man, to leave his native country. After two years’ residence in France, in 1981, at the age of ninety-three, he settled in Scottsdale, Arizona, where he passed away on 16 November 1984, aged 96 (H. ‘Alā’i, 2002, 28-29; idem, 1994, p. 594).

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