



# BAHAISM XIII. BAHAI PIONEERS

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## BAHAISM

### xiii. Bahai Pioneers

“Pioneer” (in English) and *mohājer* (in Persian: migrant, pl. *mohājerin*) are terms used in Bahai literature to designate those who leave their homes to settle in another locality with the intention of spreading the Bahai faith or supporting existing Bahai communities.

The Bahai faith does not have any professional religious leaders. Therefore all of the functions normally undertaken by these individuals, including missionary activities, are the responsibility of ordinary Bahais. In the Bahai community, ordinary Bahais move to a new area where they find employment or set up their business and then seek out converts in their new locality. This movement may be to a different area in the same country or to a foreign country where there are no Bahais, or it may be to an area where the existing Bahai community is weak. This activity and those doing it are called *mohājarat* (migration) and *mohājerin* (migrants) respectively in Persian and pioneering and pioneers in English. The pioneer is supposed to remain in that place until the Bahai faith is firmly established among the native people of that area and its institutions are functioning properly (Horby, comp., p. 578).

The [Bāb](#) instructed his first eighteen disciples, called “the Letters of the Living”



(*ḥoruf al-ḥayy*), to disperse and take his message throughout Iran and the neighboring countries. There are also many instances where Bahā'-Allāh directed Bahais to travel to a foreign country (e.g., India), in order to spread the Bahai faith there (Momen, 1999-2000), or among the Baḳtiāri and the tribes of Kermanshah (Ra'fati, p. 96). But such a person would usually be a traveling teacher (*mobballeḡ*) and would not remain in the area for long. In the time of 'Abd-al-Bahā', there is more evidence of his instructing Bahais to settle in various places; for example he asked some of the Turkish-speaking Bahais of Azarbaijan to move to towns in Anatolia (Fāẓel Māzandarāni, pp. 62, 98).

In 1916-17, 'Abd-al-Bahā' wrote a series of letters to the North American Bahais, known as *Farāmin-e tabliḡi* (in Eng., *Tablets of the Divine Plan*; lit. Missionary commands) in which he gives instructions about various places around the world where Bahais are to settle. Although there was little response to this call in his lifetime, these letters were regarded by Shoghi Effendi in later years as the charter and ground plan for the expansion of the Bahai faith. However, the spread of the Bahai faith was largely by happenstance up to the 1930s. A Bahai might move to a new area because of his/her work or might be converted in one area and then return to his/her home town or village and start spreading the Bahai faith there. The spread of the faith in an area may also be the result of persecution somewhere else, such as the establishment and growth of the Bahai community of Ashkhabad (see Bahatism vi) by Bahais escaping persecution in Iran (Momen, 1991).

Shoghi Effendi spent the first fifteen years of his leadership of the Bahai community building up the institutions of the Bahai administration. Then in 1937, he began to implement the instructions given by 'Abd-al-Bahā' in the *Farāmin-e tabliḡi*, creating systematic plans for the expansion of the Bahai community and asking National Spiritual Assemblies (*Maḥfel-e Ruḥāni*) to send Bahais to areas where there were no Bahais. It was at this time that Shoghi Effendi first began to use terms in Persian that linked this activity to the early history of Islam, by calling a person who moved to a new area *mohājer*, implicitly linking this activity to those who moved from Mecca to Medina with the Prophet Moḥammad. A person who first moved to a country that did not have any Bahais was called a *fāteḥ* (opener, conqueror), using the term that designates those who, in early Islamic history, opened up new areas to Islamic rule.

Up until that time, the word *mohājer* had been used in Bahai texts to designate those Bahais who had moved from Iran to the Haifa-'Akkā area to live in



proximity to the Bahai leadership. In English, however, Shoghi Effendi used the term “pioneer,” which had entirely different connotations for the American Bahais to whom it was addressed. For them, it evoked the spirit of those who opened up new areas for settlement in the early history of the United States. In addition, Shoghi Effendi translated and published *Nabil’s Narrative* (1932), a history of the sufferings and sacrifices of the early Babis, in order to inspire the Western Bahais to make the sacrifices needed for pioneering to difficult posts in less developed countries of the world (Momen, 2011).

*The History of mohājerat (pioneering).* The planned sending out of pioneers began with the Seven-Year Plan of the North American Bahais (1937-44), when Shoghi Effendi asked for pioneers to be sent to those countries in South America, where there were no Bahais. Thus the North American Bahai community was the first to be given goals for pioneering, and soon other Bahai communities were also being asked to do this. Within a decade, every community where a National Spiritual Assembly had been established was given goals for expansion, including for the sending out of pioneers, for spreading the Bahai faith both in their own country and beyond.

In 1938, Shoghi Effendi began to refer in his letters to Iran to the need for Bahais to migrate in order to spread the Bahai faith (1973b, p. 188), and, shortly afterwards, Bahais began to move to some 187 places, often villages, in Iran where there were no Bahais; most were forced to leave because of local pressure against them. In addition, starting in 1941, some 145 Bahai families left Iran to settle in Arabia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Baluchistan (Pakistan), and Bahrain. The majority of these families settled in Iraq but were deported by the Iraqi government two years later (*Bahā’ī World* 9, pp. 56, 81-82). A notable one among them was Abu’l-Qāsem Fayzi, who moved with his wife to Bahrain in 1942 and was later designated a Hand of the Cause (*Ayādi-e Amr Allāh*). In October 1946, the Iranian Bahai community adopted a 45-Month Plan, in which Bahais were sent to settle in twenty-two new localities in Iran and also to Iraq, India, Bahrain, Afghanistan, and various places in Arabia and the Persian Gulf (*Bahā’ī World* 11, pp. 34-35; Shoghi Effendi, 1968, p. 31; idem, 1973b, p. 287). During 1951-53, several Iranian families moved to Africa in order to assist with the Two-Year Plan of the British Bahais to open up three African countries to the Bahai faith. One of them, Musā Banāni (to Uganda in 1951), was named a Hand of the Cause a few years later.

During the Ten-Year Plan (1953-63), Shoghi Effendi gave each of the twelve



National Bahai Assemblies then in existence a plan that included many goals for which they had to cooperate with each other. This plan called for pioneers to move to 131 countries, territories, and islands where there were no Bahais. Iran was made responsible for 7 territories in Asia and 6 territories in Africa, as well as consolidating the Bahai communities in a further 12 territories in Asia and 2 in Africa. For the first year from April 1953 to May 1954, any Bahai that migrated to one of the 131 territories was designated a knight (*fāres*) of Bahā'-Allāh. After that date, only the first to arrive at one of these places was thus designated. Of the 252 people that were named knights, 24 were Iranians with another 20 people of Iranian origin from India and Egypt. Among these was Raḥmat-Allāh Moḥājjer, who pioneered with his wife from Iran to the Mentawai Islands, Indonesia, and was later designated a Hand of the Cause (*Bahā'ī World* 12, pp. 256, 261, 263, 268; 13, pp. 291-92, 449-57, 459).

When the Universal House of Justice was established, it launched a Nine-Year Plan (1964-73), in the course of which the Bahais of Iran were given the primary responsibility of sending pioneers to Afghanistan, Mongolia, and seven of the Asian Soviet Republics; these same territories continued to be their responsibility during the subsequent Five-Year Plan (1974-79). However, during the former plan they had additional responsibilities to send pioneers to Arabia and 6 countries in Africa, and in the latter plan they also had secondary goals of settling pioneers in 56 other countries in Asia, Africa, Europe, and South America (*Analysis*, 1964, pp. 21-22, 34; *Analysis*, 1974, pp. 35-38, 93).

The Iranian Bahais were at this time numerically the largest Bahai community in the world. The fact that they are relatively unrepresented in the early years of Bahai pioneering is because of the greater problems they faced, compared with Bahais from North America and Europe. Most Iranian Bahais did not have the level of education that would enable them to obtain employment in another country. Furthermore, Iran did not have diplomatic relations with most countries, so it was more difficult to obtain a visa. The Bahai pioneers to Arabia and Bahrain in the 1940s, for example, had first to move to Iraq and settle there for while to obtain visas before moving on to their final goal. There were also language problems. These problems eased as time went on and at the end of the Five-Year Plan in 1979, the Universal House of Justice announced that the Iranian Bahais had “far surpassed any other national community in their outpouring of pioneers” (1996, p. 401).

On the other hand, 1979 was also marked by the establishment of the Islamic



Revolution in Iran, which crippled the Iranian Bahai community. Although a large number left Iran in the immediate aftermath of the Revolution, only a small number of these were able to settle in pioneer positions. What is more, with the banning of the Bahai administrative institutions in Iran, the Iranian Bahai community has been given no formal goals in subsequent plans. Iranian Bahais living outside Iran have, however, continued to be probably the largest group undertaking international Bahai pioneering. Many of the Iranian Bahai pioneers experienced extreme hardship and privations, often having to adopt local standards of living below what they were used to. For instance, Qodrat-Allāh ‘Āzemikvāh used to travel among the villages of the Congo repairing kerosene lamps (*Bahā’ī World* 16, pp. 519-20). Some even lost their lives (*Bahā’ī World* 15, pp. 257, 514-17; *Bahā’ī World* 1993-94, pp. 147-50, 156-57). One consequence of the large number of Iranian pioneers in different countries of the world is that many Bahais in these parts of the world are somewhat familiar with Persian culture and language.

The nature of pioneering has evolved throughout Bahai history and will presumably continue to evolve. Even in the early decades of the 20th century, a small number of American Bahais were asked to migrate to Iran. The purpose was not to increase the number of Bahais but to help with education and health projects in Iran (Armstrong-Ingram). Since the beginning of the 21st century, this aspect of supporting Bahai communities has become more prominent with pioneers now usually being asked to help in building capacity among the Bahais and to assist the development activities of the community to which they go (involving such activities as study classes, children’s classes, junior youth empowerment programs, and devotional meetings). Furthermore, pioneering is now often a short-term commitment, sometimes lasting only for three months.

*The Role of mohājerat (pioneering).* Shoghi Effendi wrote at length about the action of pioneering. He described it as a spiritually meritorious, although not an obligatory, service that all Bahais should consider performing and wrote of a pioneer’s function as being “far above the average service” (1973a, p. 55). In the opening phase of the Ten-Year Plan, he even stated in a general letter sent to most national Bahai communities, that, at that time, pioneering took “precedence over every other type of Bahā’i service” (1970, p. 162; idem, 1981, p. 303, idem, 1982, I, p. 194; cf. also idem, 1968, p. 71; Hornby, comp., pp. 579, 581-82). He wrote of the fact that it was a service that even simple, ordinary Bahais could perform (1981, pp. 172-73). He advised, however, that, despite its



importance, pioneering should not be allowed to disrupt the normal family relationships of husband and wife or parents and children (The Universal House of Justice, 1991, I, p. 409, II, p. 383; cf. Hornby, comp., pp. 232-33). He also considered it the duty of the Bahai institutions to give every assistance to individuals in overcoming problems that might prevent them from pioneering (1968, pp. 71-72). During the Ten-Year Plan, he linked the activity of pioneering, which was then being done on a global scale, with the prophecies in the Book of Daniel of the 1335 days and of Habbakuk that the “the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea” (Daniel 12:12; Habakkuk 2:14; Shoghi Effendi, 1973a, pp. 54-55).

Both ‘Abd-all-Baha’ (pp. 26, 50, 61; tr., pp. 32, 38, 52; *Star of the West* 8/3, p. 37) and Shoghi Effendi (The Universal House of Justice, 1991, I, pp. 40-41) wrote of the need for pioneers to acquire proficiency in the local language and to familiarize themselves with the history, customs, and the social and religious background and traditions of the people of the areas to which they were moving. The Universal House of Justice has stated, however, that being a pioneer involves no special status or authority in the Bahai community (Hornby, comp., pp. 573, 588). Although financial help may be given to those who need it in order to move to and settle in a new location, it is expected that they make every effort to obtain employment or set up a business in order to become financially independent (Shoghi Effendi, 1973b, p. 285; Hornby, comp., pp. 572, 589; The Universal House of Justice, 1991, II, p. 63).

See also [CONVERSION v. TO BABISM AND THE BAHAI FAITH](#).

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