

Letters of the Living (*Hurúf-i-Hayy*)

Title given by the Báb to His first eighteen disciples.

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HISTORY

Between May and July 1844, seventeen men and one woman became the first followers of the [Báb](#) (Siyyid 'Alí-Muhammad), a young merchant from the city of Shiraz in southern Iran who claimed to be both a Messenger of God and the herald of another greater than He. These eighteen individuals were adherents of the Shaykhí school

of Shia Islam—based on the teachings of Shaykh Ahmad Ahsá'í (1753–1826) and Siyyid Kázim Rashtí (d. 31 December 1843/1 January 1844)—and had been seeking spiritual direction after Siyyid Kázim died without appointing a successor. A number of them had undertaken a spiritual retreat before journeying from Karbala in Iraq to Shiraz. There the leader of the group, Mullá Husayn Bushrú'í, encountered Siyyid 'Alí-Muhammad and, in the course of one evening, became the first to recognize Him as the Báb. After an interval of forty days, the other disciples found themselves drawn to Him. Each of the eighteen recognized Him independently, gave Him allegiance, and agreed not to reveal His identity until the appointed time. The Báb gave each of these first disciples the title "Letter of the Living."

No full, contemporaneous list of the Letters of the Living exists. According to the historian Nabíl (1831–92),¹ they were:

- Mullá Husayn Bushrú'í (c. 1814–49): the first to declare his belief in the Báb (in Shiraz on 23 May 1844); given the title *Bábu'l-Báb* (Gate of the Gate) by the Báb; original leader of a group of Bábís attacked near Babul (Barfurush) in northern Iran in October 1848 and later besieged at the nearby shrine of Shaykh Tabarsí until May 1849; killed there on 2 February 1849.
- Mírzá Muhammad Hasan Bushrú'í (d. 1849): younger brother of Mullá Husayn; accompanied Mullá Husayn on his travels; badly wounded in the same battle at Shaykh Tabarsí in which Mullá Husayn was killed; according to some accounts, then served as leader of the Bábí forces; subsequently killed at Shaykh Tabarsí.
- Mírzá Muhammad Báqir Bushrú'í (d. 1849): nephew of Mullá Husayn; according to some accounts, led the forces at Shaykh Tabarsí after Mullá Husayn was killed and Mírzá Muhammad Hasan was wounded; killed at Shaykh Tabarsí.
- [Mullá 'Alí Bastamí](#) (d. 1846): the second to recognize the Báb; directed by Him to announce His advent in the Shiite shrine cities of Iraq; arrested, tried in Baghdad in January 1845, and sentenced to work for life in the imperial naval docks; died in an Istanbul prison, becoming the first Bábí martyr.
- Mullá Khudá-Bakhsh Qúchání (later named Mullá 'Alí Rází): returned to Karbala from Shiraz; did not actively participate in the Bábí community.
- Mullá Hasan Bajistání: active at first in propagating the Bábí Cause; later retired to Karbala, considering himself unworthy of the station conferred by the Báb on the Letters of the Living; visited [Bahá'u'lláh](#) in Baghdad (between 1853 and 1863).



The House of the Báb, Shiraz, Iran, before its destruction in 1979. © Bahá'í International Community. Bahá'í Media Bank

- Siyyid Husayn Yazdí (d. 1852): accompanied the Báb as His secretary during His imprisonment in Mákú and Chihriq; known as *Kátib* (the Amanuensis); executed during an outbreak of persecutions in 1852 that followed an unsuccessful attempt on the life of the shah by a small group of Bábís seeking revenge for the execution of the Báb (See Tehran.The Bábí Period).
- Mírzá Muhammad Rawdih-Khán Yazdí (or Dhákir-i-Masá'ib): returned from Shiraz to Yazd; because of persecution of the Bábís, chose not to reveal his beliefs but continued to teach the Bábí Faith covertly to the end of his life.
- Sa'íd Hindí: went to India and converted one or two persons there before contact with him ceased.
- Mullá Mahmúd Khú'í (d. 1849): killed at Shaykh Tabarsí.
- Mullá Jalíl Urúmí (d. 1849): taught the Bábí Faith especially in Azerbaijan and Qazvin; killed at Shaykh Tabarsí.
- Mullá Ahmad Abdál Marághi'í (d. 1849): present at the Conference of Badasht, a gathering of the Báb's followers held in 1848; killed at Shaykh Tabarsí.
- Mullá Báqir Tabrízí (d. c. 1881): assisted Táhirih (listed below) in Karbala, then traveled to Iran with her; present at Badasht; visited the Báb in Azerbaijan and acted as intermediary for the Báb's correspondence and other items that He wished delivered to Bahá'u'lláh; became a follower of Bahá'u'lláh after visiting Him in Baghdad; traveled twice to Acre (See: [Bahá'í World Center](#)); with Bahá'u'lláh's permission, spent his last years in Istanbul; the last surviving Letter of the Living.
- Mullá Yúsuf Ardibílí (d. 1849): noted for his learning and eloquence; played an active and prominent role among the Bábís; killed at Shaykh Tabarsí.
- Mírzá Muhammad-'Alí Qazvíní (d. 1849): son of Mullá 'Abdu'l-Vahháb, a *mujtahid* (preeminent religious scholar) of Qazvin; cousin and brother-in-law of Táhirih, closely associated with her in Karbala; entrusted by her with a sealed letter and a verbal message to be delivered to the Promised One whom they both sought; present at Badasht; killed at Shaykh Tabarsí.
- Mírzá Hádí Qazvíní: brother of Mírzá Muhammad-'Alí Qazvíní; distanced himself from the Bábís and played no important role; recipient of several letters from Bahá'u'lláh;² became a follower of [Mírzá Yahyá](#) (Azal); some lists replace him with Mullá Muhammad Miyámayí, who actively propagated the new religion in Mayámeý (Miyámay),³ a small town and district near Shāhrūd in northeastern Iran.
- Táhirih (c. 1814–52) (the Pure One), title given ⁴ to Fátimih (Fatima) Baraghání, or Umm-Salamih, also known by the titles *Qurratu'l-'Ayn* (Solace of the Eyes) and *Zarrín-Táj* (Crown of Gold): a prominent Shaykhí and an accomplished poet; the only woman among the Letters of the Living; having been accorded the distinction of becoming a Letter of the Living on the basis of a message she sent via her brother-in-law, the only Letter not to have met the Báb personally; a participant at the Conference of Badasht, appearing there without her veil to signal a new era; executed in September 1852 during the persecutions that decimated the Bábí ranks after the unsuccessful attempt to assassinate the shah (See: Tehran.The Bábí Period).
- Quddús (c. 1822–49) (the Most Holy), title given⁵ to Mullá Muhammad-'Alí Bárfurúshí: the last Letter of the Living; accompanied the Báb on His pilgrimage to Mecca (1844–45); present at Badasht and subsequently arrested and detained in Sárí for more than three months; having been released through the efforts of Mullá Husayn, joined the Bábí forces at Shaykh Tabarsí in late 1848; played a leading role in the Bábí defense; taken prisoner on 10 May 1849, following the final siege at Shaykh Tabarsí, tortured, and then killed on 16 May 1849 in Barfurush (Babul), the town of his birth; ranked by Bahá'u'lláh as having been second only to the Báb,



A view of Badasht, c. 1930. Photographer: Effie Baker. © Bahá'í International Community. [Bahá'í Media Bank](#)

and described by [Shoghi Effendi](#) as the first in rank among the Letters of the Living.⁶



A small part of the fort of Shaykh Tabarsí where Mullá Husayn and a group of Bábís were besieged in 1848–49. *Bahá'í Photographic Library*

The Letters of the Living thus included individuals of varying degrees of commitment and leadership ability. The majority remained active adherents. Most gave their lives for the religion of the Báb, nine of them during or immediately following the siege at Shaykh Tabarsí. Several were noted for their roles in shaping the evolution of Bábí history. A few, despite their precedence as disciples, chose not to remain in the forefront of the Bábí Faith.

The Báb often refers to the Letters of the Living in His writings. One may find their names mentioned, at times indirectly, in such works as the Persian Bayán and the Arabic Bayán (His two major works) and the Seven Proofs. He composed many texts for them in the form of prayers or responses to questions and wrote "tablets of visitation" (prayers recited at a shrine or grave site) in their honor, especially for those who died at Shaykh Tabarsí.

SIGNIFICANCE

The term "Letters of the Living" is both a title and a theological statement. The expression comprises two Arabic words: *hurúf* (singular: *harf*), meaning "letters," and *hayy*, meaning "the living." The combination *hurúf-i-hayy* is new; it does not occur in the Islamic scriptures. In His early writings, the Báb also referred to His first disciples by the word *sábiqún* or *sábiqín* (the forerunners), which stems from Islamic Traditions and texts.

The term "letter" is symbolic, as is the Báb's use of the term *Nuqtih* (Point) to refer to the Manifestation or Messenger of God, who is the embodiment of the Primal Will (a concept similar to the Logos or "Word" in Christianity). According to the Báb, God created the Primal Will through the causation of the Primal Will itself and then created all things through the causation of the Primal Will; in other words, the Creator of the cosmos and spiritual civilization is the Manifestation of God. The term "Point" indicates that everything originates with the Manifestation, even as each letter and word originates with the mark made as the pen first touches paper.⁷ The Báb is known as "the Point of the Bayán" (referring to the title of the Báb's two major books as well as, in general terms, all of the Báb's writings), just as the Báb calls the Prophet Muhammad "the Point of the Qur'án."⁸ The title "Point" may be interpreted as an indication of the two stations of the Manifestation, divine and worldly, just as the geometric point, which has no specific dimension, mediates between the physical and the nonphysical worlds.

From the point, the mark that is made as the pen touches paper, emanate the letters of the alphabet, which are the primary and basic units of written language. The whole body of knowledge is based on these units. The letters are all different, but they have a common root in the point, the first mark made by the pen; no matter how numerous, they have one background, one common source. The letter is the intermediary between the point, which is the genesis of all letters, and words and sentences, which are composed of letters. Thus the term "letters" (*hurúf*), when attributed to the first to believe in a Manifestation, acknowledges these souls as letters coming forth from the Point, just as the form of every letter begins with a point made on a page.

When applied to the Báb's first disciples, the appellation "letter" may be seen to emphasize their role in inaugurating a divinely revealed religion. Likewise, the term "letter" suggests the use of familiar, universal symbols combined to revive the body of knowledge through the renewal of the vocabulary—that is, the same unchanged letters form entirely original words. The "letters" may be seen as a

symbolic expression of both a new scripture and a new civilization.

The Báb also uses the term "letter" with a broader meaning, applying it to all believers, not just to His first disciples: "Whoso acteth in conformity with that which is revealed therein [the Bayán] will abide in Paradise, under the shadow of His affirmation and reckoned among the most sublime Letters in the presence of God."⁹

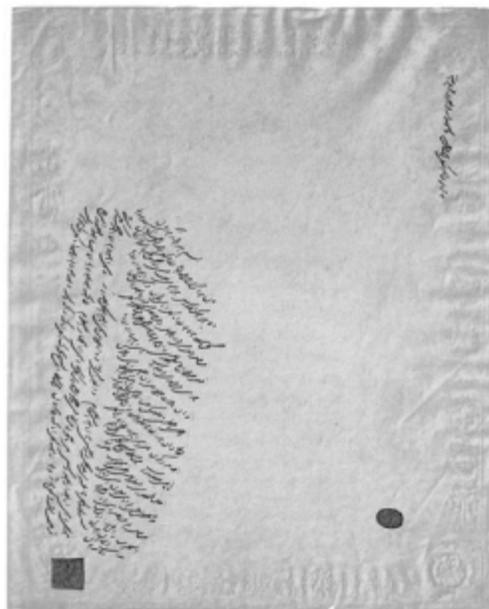
The Islamic and Bábí scriptures use the word *hayy* (the living) as one of the names of God. Islamic theology refers to God's attributes by two categories of names: the attributes of the essence of God and the attributes of God's actions. *Hayy* is one of the seven names used for the attributes of God's essence, which are inseparable from one another. In His writings the Báb sometimes uses a combination of six particular attributes of God—one of which is *Hayy*. These are the Incomparable (*Fard*), the Ever-Living (*Hayy*), the Self-Subsisting (*Qayyúm*), the All-Wise (*Hakím*), the Just (*'Adl*), and the Holy (*Quddús*). Taken together, these names have nineteen Arabic letters, thus representing the Primal Unity (see discussion of numerical symbolism and of the term *váhid*, meaning "unity," below).

The Báb uses the word *hayy* within the context of the term *hurúf-i-hayy* to convey multiple meanings. Since *Hayy* is one of the attributes of God, its use in the term "Letters of the Living" suggests that these disciples manifest attributes that reflect the divine; and "the living" within this phrase refers as well to those who are given life (that is, the life of the spirit of faith) and the ability to transfer this spirit of life to others. The term also connotes the life given by God on the Day of Resurrection (which, the Báb teaches, is the coming of a new Messenger of God), when all will rise from the dead (that is, will be given a new spiritual life rather than a physical resurrection). By calling His first disciples "the Letters of the Living," the Báb affirms that the Day of Resurrection has come to pass, that the dead have risen, and that these eighteen disciples are the first to arise. The Báb also refers to the Qur'anic description of God as *Hayyu'l-Qayyúm* (the Ever-Living, the Self-Subsistent) and to His (the Báb's) identity as *Qayyúm* (the first sacred text He revealed is called the *Qayyúmu'l-Asmá*), with *Hayy* being realized through the eighteen souls who first recognized Him. In another Qur'anic reference, to the fact that all things live by water, the Báb indicates that the Letters of the Living bring all believers to life and that all are created by the Divine Water—which is the Revelation of God and of the verses of sacred scripture.

The word *hayy* has numerical symbolism as well. In the time of the Báb, the ancient *abjad* system, in which every letter of the Arabic alphabet has a numerical value, was widely used. According to this system, each word has both a literal meaning and a numerical value. The word *hayy* equals the number eighteen, corresponding to the number of the Báb's first believers.

The Bayán proclaims that the Letters of the Living constitute the "return" of eighteen figures: Muhammad, the Prophet of Islam; His son-in-law Ali; His daughter Fatima; eleven of their descendants who were the Imams from the Holy Family; and four others—the four angels responsible for creation, sustenance, death, and existence, or the four vicegerents who were intermediaries for the Hidden Imam.¹⁰ Thus there is a correspondence between the number of the key figures in Shia Islam, the number of the first believers in the Báb, and the numerical value of the word *hayy*.

The eighteen Letters of the Living, along with the Báb Himself, comprise the first *váhid* of the Bábí religion. The word *váhid*, which means "unity," refers in the first instance to the unity of God. The



The Báb's letter to Quddús, the last Letter of the Living, in the Báb's own handwriting. Bahá'í Photographic Library

numerical value of the word *váhid*, according to the abjad system of calculation, is 19. This number also applies to the invocation *Bismi'lláhi'r-Rahmání'-Rahím* (In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful), which opens the chapters of the Qur'an, and *Bismi'lláhi'l-Amna'i'l-Aqdas* (In the Name of God, the Most Exalted, the Most Holy), with which many of the Báb's writings begin. Each of these invocations has nineteen letters in the Arabic alphabet. Thus the system of sacred order in the Báb's religion is expressed by the number 19 and, after that, 361 (19 x 19), which corresponds numerically with the theological term *kull-i-shay'* ("all things"—i.e., the entire creation in every aspect of existence, or the cosmos).¹¹ The writings of the Báb indicate and commemorate the unparalleled greatness of the first *váhid*, the Letters of the Living, in that the days of the month of Bahá—the first month of the Báb's calendar (later to become the Bahá'í calendar)—refer to them.



A view of the fortress of Mákú in Azerbaijan, where the Báb was imprisoned for nine months in 1847–48 and where He commenced composition of the Persian Bayán. Bahá'í Photographic Library

The number nineteen is symbolic of creation; one of the names of the Báb is *Nuqtíy-i-Úlá*, "the Primal Point," indicating that everything—first, the Letters of the Living, and then all other parts of "all things"—originates from Him. In line with the symbolism of sacred script, including letters and points, as discussed above, the point under the Arabic letter *b*, or *ba* (ب), the first letter in each of the two invocations cited, relates to the famous Tradition attributed to Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of Muhammad and the first Imam of the Shia: "All of the knowledge of all the holy books is in the Qur'an, and all of the knowledge of the Qur'an is in the *Fátiha* [the first sura], and all of the knowledge of the *Fátiha* is in the *Basmala* [i.e., the invocation *Bismi'lláhi'r-Rahmání'-Rahím*], and all of the knowledge of the *Basmala* is in the letter *ba*, and all of the knowledge in the *ba* is in the point [*nuqtih*] under the *ba*, and I am that point."¹² The Báb is the letter *b* itself. All knowledge is in the nineteen letters of the Basmala and derives from the Báb as a Manifestation of God in the station of the Primal Point. The term "point" also refers to the Tradition that knowledge is a single point that the ignorant have multiplied.

Symbolically, the Bábí system of order may be viewed as an expression of the sacred relationship linking each member of the community to the first *váhid* and beyond that to the Point, the Manifestation of God, who is simultaneously and mysteriously part of the first *váhid*

and yet transcends it. Although the Báb did not define exactly how His community was to be organized at the social level, He stated that every member of a *váhid* functions as a generating point for another *váhid*.¹³ This order does not necessarily lead, however, to the assignment of rank. Any pure soul among the rank and file of believers may be spiritually close to the Manifestation.

The Bayán explains that the Letters of the Living are the signs of God's living Manifestation (*hayy-i-lam yazal*).¹⁴ The Manifestation is the mirror of God, and the Letters of the Living are mirrors of the Kingdom of the Manifestation, reflecting only His reflection.¹⁵ They are the return of the Holy Family of Islam¹⁶—the return of essences and attributes, not a physical resurrection or reincarnation.¹⁷ They are the inhabitants of Paradise.¹⁸ The Letters of the Living are the same entity in all the religions of the past and the future and a symbolic expression of the unity of the religion of God in all of its aspects.¹⁹ The Letters of the Living are the intermediaries through whom the Sun of Truth (the Manifestation of

God) is recognized,²⁰ and they are always under the shadow of His grace and glory.²¹ They have no authority except through Him.²² Whoever takes refuge under their shadow is saved, until the advent of "Him Whom God Shall Make Manifest" (the promised Manifestation). The Letters of the Living are like mirrors: as long as they reflect the Sun of Truth, they are the source of spiritual influence; but if they turn away from Him, they lose that power.²³

Although the Báb extols the Letters of the Living in the same terms in which the imams of Shia Islam are extolled and includes them within the structure of His covenant with His followers, He also specifically denies them the binding authority that would have been necessary had He intended them to function as His successors. Instead, the layers of covenantal authority that existed in Islam are realized in the Báb's own Manifestation, indicating that He intended no real succession during the period between His death and the revelation of the Promised One.²⁴

The Báb gave the Letters of the Living no authority to interpret, no office to rule, and no ongoing function among their coreligionists. Theirs was not a political designation but a spiritual one. They were respected for their precedence (*sabq*) in recognizing the Báb, but the Bayán makes it clear that their station is entirely spiritual and symbolic.²⁵ They were not elected but chosen. They recognized the Manifestation of God by seeking the truth and were accorded distinction because they came to know the Báb through independent spiritual experiences and visions. Several of these first disciples, singled out by the Báb and given a particularly high station, exercised charismatic authority among their fellow Bábís. However, this authority flowed mainly from their personal qualities and accomplishments rather than from their station as Letters of the Living.

Author: *The Editors*

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Notes:

1. Nabíl A'zam [Muhammad Zarandí], *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabil's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahá'í Revelation*, trans. and ed. Shoghi Effendi (1932: Wilmette, IL, USA: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1996) 80–81.
2. Excerpts from a tablet to Mírzá Hádí Qazvíní are published in Bahá'u'lláh, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, trans. Shoghi Effendi, 1st pocket-size ed. (Wilmette, IL, USA: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983, 2005 printing) 73: 140–41; 83: 164–66; 124: 261–64.
3. Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844–1850*, paperback ed. (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 2005) 176–77, n140.
4. According to Nabíl A'zam in *Dawn-Breakers* 293, the title *Táhirih* was given by Bahá'u'lláh at the Conference of Badasht. However, H. M. Balyúzí in *The Báb: The Herald of the Day of Days* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1973) 163 explains that the Báb used the title to describe her in a letter written some time earlier, while she was still in Iraq.
5. According to Nabíl A'zam in *Dawn-Breakers* 293, the title *Quddús* was given by Bahá'u'lláh at the Conference of Badasht. However, Balyuzi in *The Báb* 24, without indicating his source, states that the title was conferred by the Báb.
6. Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, new ed. (Wilmette, IL, USA: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1974, 2004 printing) 49, 7.
7. Báb, Persian Bayán 3:11.
8. Báb, *Selections from the Writings of the Báb*, comp. Research Department of the Universal House of Justice, trans. Habib Taherzadeh, 1st pocket-size ed. (Wilmette, IL, USA: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 2006) 3:8.2: 107.
9. Báb, *Selections* 3:30.1: 131.

10. Báb, Persian Bayán 1:1.
11. Báb, Persian Bayán 7:18.
12. Translation by Todd Lawson (unpublished).
13. Báb, Persian Bayán 7:8.
14. Báb, Persian Bayán Introduction.
15. Báb, Persian Bayán 1:1, 5:17.
16. Báb, Persian Bayán 1:2.
17. Báb, Persian Bayán 2:11.
18. Báb, Persian Bayán 2:16.
19. Báb, Persian Bayán 3:13.
20. Báb, Persian Bayán 6:7.
21. Báb, Persian Bayán 7:19.
22. Báb, Persian Bayán 7:7.
23. Báb, Persian Bayán 4:6.
24. For a fuller explanation, see Nader Saiedi, *Logos and Civilization: Spirit, History, and Order in the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* (Bethesda: UP of Maryland, 2000) 294–99.
25. Báb, Persian Bayán 3:16, 4:1.

Understanding the Citations

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Other Sources and Related Reading:

- Frequent references to the Letters of the Living are found in the Persian and the Arabic Bayán. These works in their entirety have not been translated authoritatively; brief selections from the Persian Bayán, most of which are not directly relevant to this article, are published in *Selections from the Writings of the Báb* 3:1.1–3.39.2: 99–146.
- For information on the Letters of the Living in English, see the chapter on "Táhirih" in 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *Memorials of the Faithful*, trans. Marzieh Gail, 1st softcover ed. (Wilmette, IL, USA: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1997) 69: 188–200; and Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 5–8. See also Nabil A'zam, *Dawn-Breakers*, especially 65–70, 80–84; Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal* 174–81, 220–38; Balyúzí, *The Báb* 26–27; Moojan Momen, ed., *The Bábí and Bahá'í Religions, 1844–1944: Some Contemporary Western Accounts* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1981) 83–90; R. Mehrabkhani, *Mullá Husayn: Disciple at Dawn* (Los Angeles: Kalimát, 1987); Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Bahá'u'lláh*, vol. 2: *Adrianople, 1863–68* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1977) 144–47; and Muhammad Afnan, "'Point' and 'Letter' in the Writings of the Báb," *Lights of 'Irfán: Papers Presented at the 'Irfán Colloquia and Seminars*, Book II (Evanston, IL, USA: Haj Mehdi Arjmand Memorial Fund, 2001) 149–50.
- For information on the Letters of the Living in Persian, see Nusrat'u'lláh Muhammad-Husayní, *The Báb: His Life, His Writings and the Disciples of the Báb's Dispensation* (Dundas, ON, Can.: Institute for Bahá'í Studies in Persian, 1995); Abu'l-Qásim Afnán, *'Ahd-i-A'lá: Zindigáníy-i-Hadrat-i-Báb (The Bábí Dispensation, the Life of the Báb)* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000); Asadu'lláh Fádíl Mázandarání, *Tárikh zuhúru'l-haqq*, vol. 3 (Tehran: Mu'assasiy-i-Milliy-i-Matbú'át-i-Amrí, n.d.). For information in French, see A. L. M. Nicolas, *Seyyid Ali Mohammed dit le Báb* (Paris: Dujarric, 1905).
- Information for this article was received from Muhammad Afnan, Todd Lawson, Peter Smith, Bijan Bayzaee (Office of Persian-American Affairs, National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States), and Nader Saiedi.

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