‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution: Embracing Principles while Disapproving Methodologies

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Abstract

This article explores ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s orientation toward the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1906–11) and proposes that, deeply rooted in Bahá’u’lláh’s writings and teachings, His attitude was one of embracing the principles of constitutionalism while disapproving the confrontational nature of the interactions. After investigating some passages in the Bahá’í Writings relevant to the topic and discussing (1) ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s efforts to reconcile the majlis and the court of the Shah while urging Bahá’ís to do the same (or withdraw if unsuccessful); (2) His warnings against foreign interference, the involvement of the ‘ulamá in politics, and the role of Yaḥyáyís in the Revolution; (3) His views on obedience to the government and non-interference in partisan politics; and (4) His concern that the Bahá’ís would be scapegoated if they intervened, this article focuses on His view that real social change needs to start at the moral-ethical level, a corollary of spiritual rejuvenation. The article concludes by examining this view as a guideline for Bahá’í action in times of sociopolitical turmoil as exemplified by the April 2011 letter of the Bahá’ís of Egypt to the people of that country.

Résumé

L’auteur explore ici la position de ‘Abdu’l-Bahá concernant la Révolution constitutionnaliste iranienne (1906-1911). Il propose que ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, dont les conceptions étaient profondément ancrées dans les écrits et les enseignements de Bahá’u’lláh, soutenait les principes du constitutionnalisme tout en désapprouvant la nature conflictuelle des interactions. Après avoir approfondi certains passag-
es des écrits bahá’ís sur le sujet et avoir examiné (1) les efforts déployés par ‘Abdu’l-Bahá pour que le majlis (Assemblée nationale constituante) et la cour du Shah se réconcilient, tout en exhortant les bahá’ís à œuvrer en ce sens (ou à se retirer, en cas d’échec); (2) ses avertissements concernant l’ingérence étrangère, la participation des oulémas dans les affaires politiques et le rôle des yaḥyáyís dans la Révolution; (3) ses vues sur l’obéissance au gouvernement et la non-ingérence dans la politique partisane; et (4) sa crainte que les bahá’ís servent de boucs émissaires s’ils intervenaient, l’auteur souligne le point de vue de ‘Abdu’l-Bahá selon lequel un changement social véritable doit d’abord s’opérer au niveau éthique et moral, corolaire d’un renouvellement spirituel. L’auteur conclut en présentant ce point de vue comme une norme à suivre pour orienter l’action bahá’íe durant les périodes de bouleversements sociopolitiques, comme le démontre la lettre d’avril 2011 que les bahá’ís d’Égypte ont adressée à leurs compatriotes.

**Resumen**

Este artículo explora la orientación de Ábdu’l-Bahá hacia la Revolución Constitucional Iraní (1906 – 11) y propone que Su actitud, profundamente arraigada en los escritos y las enseñanzas de Bahá’u’lláh, fue de abrazar los principios del Constitucionalismo mientras desaprobaba la naturaleza confrontacional de las interacciones. Después de investigar algunos pasajes en los Escritos Bahá’ís relevantes al tema y discutiendo (1) los esfuerzos de ‘Abdu’l-Bahá por reconciliar los majlis y la corte mientras instaba a los bahá’ís a hacer lo mismo (o retirarse si no eran exitosos); (2) Sus advertencias en contra de la interferencia internacional, la participación de la ‘ulamá en la política, y el rol de los Yaḥyáyís en la Revolución; (3) Su punto de vista acerca de la obediencia al gobierno y la no-interferencia en la política partidista; y (4) Su preocupación que los bahá’ís se convertirían en el chivo expiatorio si intervenían, este artículo se enfoca en Su perspectiva que el cambio social real necesita empezar al nivel moral ético, un corolario del rejuvenecimiento espiritual. El artículo concluye examinando este punto de vista como una directriz para la acción bahá’í en tiempos de turbulencia sociopolítica como se ejemplifica en la carta de abril, 2011 de los bahá’ís de Egipto a los ciudadanos de su país.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá expressed “joy and gladness” and hailed the formation of Iran’s first majlis (parliament) as an achievement that was “in accordance with the explicit command of the Most Holy Book” (“Miláni Collection” 222; Ra’fáti 67–68).2 More than thirty years

2 This tablet was written in response to a letter from Washington, DC sent by “Mírzá Aḥmad” (most probably Mirzá Ahmad Isfahani, later surnamed “Sohrab”) recounting the joy in the Iranian embassy and the delight of American men of letters over the news of the formation of the majlis. The rest of this tablet has a different tone, which will be discussed later. A provisional translation of this tablet is available (Tablets of Abdul-Baha
earlier, in His 1875 Kitáb-i-Asrár-i-Ghaybiyyihli-Asbáb-i-Madaniyyih (known as Risáliy-i-Madaniyyih and translated as The Secret of Divine Civilization), ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Himself had openly proposed the creation of a representative parliament, becoming perhaps the second Iranian—after His father, Bahá’u’lláh—to do so.² He encouraged the establishment of “councils” (majális) and “consultative assemblies” (maháfíl-i-mashvarat) composed of devout and learned “elected representatives” (a’ḍáy-i-muntakhabih) (22).⁴ Yet, as the early protests of the constitutional movement commenced, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá advised Bahá’ís to remain nonpartisan (biṭaraf) and refused to sanction their participation in the uprisings. As the confrontation between the Constitutionalists and Royalists heated up, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá advised His followers to work to reconcile the two camps. If they could not succeed in reconciling the two sides, they were to simply withdraw. This article explores ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s reactions to and views on the Iranian Constitutional Revolution of 1906–1911,⁵ suggesting ‘Aynu’s-Salṭanih, wrote of it, “the book was written thirty years ago. The author does not reveal his name but it is obvious he is a Bahá’í. He stresses ethics and morality (akhláq), encourages the people of Iran to educate themselves, and speaks of the benefits of constitutional government (husn-i-hukúmat-i-mashrúṭih), stressing the need for elected representatives to be educated and behave ethically. Had the king and people of the time acted according [to the precepts of this book], the current conditions of our country would be significantly improved” (‘Aynu’s-Salṭanih, 5:3769).

² As we will see, Bahá’u’lláh was the first Iranian to bring constitutionalism and parliamentary government to the attention of His audience. On Risáliy-i-Madaniyyih, see Saiedi, Risáliy-i-Madaniyyih va Mas’áliy-i-Tajjud; Yazdani, “Risáliy-i-Madaniyyih,” 178–97. For a comparative appraisal of the Risáliy-i-Madaniyyih, see, Yazdani, “Muqáyisiy-i-Risáliy-i-Madaniyyih,” 127–67.

⁴ So prominent a theme was constitutionalism in the Risáliy–i-Madaniyyih that in 1912 the Qájár prince, ‘Aynu’s-Salṭanih, wrote of it, “the book was written thirty years ago. The author does not reveal his name but it is obvious he is a Bahá’í. He stresses ethics and morality (akhláq), encourages the people of Iran to educate themselves, and speaks of the benefits of constitutional government (husn-i-hukúmat-i-mashrúṭih), stressing the need for elected representatives to be educated and behave ethically. Had the king and people of the time acted according [to the precepts of this book], the current conditions of our country would be significantly improved” (‘Aynu’s-Salṭanih, 5:3769).

that, far from demonstrating “indifference” or lack of patriotism on the part of Bahá’ís, as the opponents of the Faith have sometimes claimed, His decisions were based on advocating one mode of social action while rejecting another. In accordance with the Bahá’í worldview and ethos ushered in by Bahá’u’lláh, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá endorsed peaceful social discourse and consultation and rejected conflict and contention between the government and the nation. Furthermore, His rejection of the ongoing confrontation between the two was at the core an anticolonial stance, heavily concerned with the protection of the country from foreign encroachments. In addition, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was convinced that the interference of the ‘ulamá (Shí’í clerics) in political affairs—as had been the case during the Constitutional Movement—would have dire consequences for the country, and He was wary of the Azalís who were heavily involved in the Revolution and exploited the turmoil to hurt the Bahá’ís. The involvement of these two groups (the ‘ulamá and the Azalís), He believed, provided the ground for scapegoating Bahá’ís in the political unrest raging in Iran. This article also suggests that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s approach to sociopolitical action during the critical period of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution—that is, His attempts to foster harmony through discourse and consultation rather than partisanship—should be viewed as the model for a proper Bahá’í response to political upheavals. The April 2011 open letter from the Bahá’ís of Egypt to their fellow citizens is a recent example of following ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s paradigm in this regard.

This article does not intend to provide a summary of the history of the Bahá’í community of Iran during the Constitutional Revolution. It does not cover the contributions made by the Bahá’í community to the development of the ideals of constitutionalism through the gradual and subtle diffusion of related Bahá’í principles and practices, such as the formation of elective consultative assemblies and educational activities.7 Nor does this

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7 This has already started to be studied by other scholars. See, for example, Momen, “The Bahá’ís and the Constitutional Revolution”; idem, “The Constitutional Movement and the Bahá’ís of Iran”; Vahman, “Nufúdh-i-Andíshiháy-i-Bábí va Bahá’í”; idem, “Ta’thír-i-Diyánat-i-Bábí va Bahá’í”; Mashhúrí, Rag-i-Ták; Amini, Rastákhíz-i-Pínhán.

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Bayat, Iran’s First Revolution; Afary, The Iranian Constitutional Revolution; Bonakdarian, Britain and the Iranian Constitutional Revolution; Chehabi and Martin, Iran’s Constitutional Revolution. See also multiple entries in Encyclopaedia Iranica, s.v. “Constitutional Revolution.”

6 The followers of Bahá’u’lláh’s half-brother, Yahyá (d.1912), who considered him the successor to the Báb.
study aim to examine the wide range of accusations made against the Bahá’ís during the Constitutional Revolution. Rather, the scope of this article is ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s views concerning the Iranian Constitutional Revolution and the decisions He made during this period. We will see how drawing on and guided by Bahá’u’lláh’s writings and teachings, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá embraced the principles of constitutionalism but disapproved approaches taken to achieve them during the Revolution. It would therefore only be appropriate to begin by reviewing some relevant concepts in the writings of Bahá’u’lláh.

FROM THE WRITINGS OF BAHÁ’U’LLÁH

The following overview of the writings of Bahá’u’lláh highlights His advocacy of constitutionalism and the critical role of social discourse and consultation in solving sociopolitical disputes. Furthermore, this section will show that the principle of obedience, submission, and loyalty to one’s government and its corollary principle, noninterference in partisan politics, both had their roots in the writings of Bahá’u’lláh and were not originated by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá.

Addressing Tehran in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas circa 1873, Bahá’u’lláh predicted the rule of people over that city: “[e] elong will the state of affairs within thee be changed, and the reins of power fall into the hands of the people” (54, para. 93). Before His 1868 exile to Akká, He praised Queen Victoria for having “entrusted the reins of counsel into the hands of the representatives of the people,” assuring her that “thereby the foundations of the edifice” of her affairs would be strengthened and “the hearts of all” that are beneath her shadow “whether high or low” would be “tranquillized” (Summons 90). With these words, Bahá’u’lláh can be regarded as the first Iranian thinker who advocated representative government. Later, around 1891, He stated His preference for a form of government that combined republicanism with monarchy: “Although a republican form of government profiteth all the peoples of the world, yet the majesty of kingship is one of the signs of God. We do not wish that the countries of the world should remain deprived thereof. If the sagacious combine the two forms into one, great will be their reward in the presence of God” (Tablets 28). In His 1891 Lawh-i-Dunyá (Tablet of the World), He clearly advocated for Constitutional monarchy—the British system of parliamentary democracy: “The system of government which the British people have adopted in London appeareth to be good, for it is adorned with the light of both kingship and of the consultation of the people” (Tablets 93). Writing at a time of political unrest when the Tobacco Revolt, which has been regarded as “perhaps the nearest thing to the European practice
of politics that had ever been experienced in Iranian history” (Katouzian 165), was well under way, He emphasized the necessity of “certain laws and principles” for Persia, and advised that “His Majesty,” the “learned divines,” and “high-ranking rulers” should gather together in a fixed place and consult on the affairs of people. He asserted that “any measures other than” this consultative process would result in “chaos and commotion” (Tablets 92). It seems that during the confrontation of some of the clerics and the merchants with the government (or more specifically, the king) following the tobacco concession, Bahá’u’lláh invited the two sides to come together and agree on measures to promote the prosperity of the people. One finds in this passage yet another articulation of the power of consultation and discourse, which He had frequently called for in His writings, as the main method for effecting social change. It would be difficult to overemphasize the centrality of this approach in Bahá’u’lláh’s writings.

On a related note, Bahá’u’lláh emphasized that His followers were fundamentally different from the Bábí militants, whose memory lingered in the mind of the Qájár monarch8 and whose ways His own disciples had been accused of following.9 In His tablet to Násiri’dd-Dín Sháh, Bahá’u’lláh declared that “sedition hath never been pleasing unto God.” Likely having the attempted assassination of the Shah in mind, He categorically disassociated Himself and His followers from violence, stating, “. . . nor were the acts committed in the past by certain foolish ones acceptable in His sight. . . . Know ye that to be killed in the path of His good pleasure is better for you than to kill” (Summons 110). In His last major work, Bahá’u’lláh calls attention to how His teachings transformed the early Bábí militancy to peaceful obedience and submission:

Previous to these forty years controversies and conflicts continually prevailed and agitated the servants of God. But since then, aided by the hosts of wisdom, of utterance, of exhortations and understanding, they have all seized and taken fast hold of the firm cord of patience and of the shining hem of fortitude, in such wise that this wronged people endured steadfastly whatever befell them,

8 This fact can easily be seen in Náṣiri’dd-Dín Sháh’s remarks to Mírzá-ì-Áshtiyání (who played a key role in the Tobacco Revolt) to the effect that, had it not been for the government’s protection, “the Bábís of Ţihrán would have beheaded the ‘ulamá” (Náẓimu’l-Islám 23).

9 See for example, Siyyid Jamá’lu’d-Din-i-Afghání’s entry on “Bábism” [by which he meant the Bahá’í Faith] in Bustáni’s encyclopedia in which he accuses Bahá’u’lláh’s followers of committing violence.
and committed everything unto God. (Epistle 71–72)

Closely related to this transformation in the sociopolitical behavior of the followers of the new religion is Bahá’u’lláh’s emphasis on their obedience to the government, a principle to which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá refers in the Risáliy-i-Siyásiyyih and, as we will see, in numerous tablets revealed by Him during the Constitutional Revolution. As an injunction in the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, Bahá’u’lláh revealed, “None must contend with those who wield authority over the people; leave unto them that which is theirs, and direct your attention to men’s hearts” (54 para. 95). In the Lawh-i-Dhabih, He exhorted the same:

Forbear ye from concerning yourselves with the affairs of this world and all that pertaineth unto it, or from meddling with the activities of those who are its outward leaders.

The one true God, exalted be His glory, hath bestowed the government of the earth upon the kings. To none is given the right to act in any manner that would run counter to the considered views of them who are in authority. That which He hath reserved for Himself are the cities of men’s hearts; and of these the loved ones of Him Who is the Sovereign Truth are, in this Day, as the keys. (Gleanings 241; emphasis added)

This theme appears in His other writings, as well. In the Bishárát (Glad-Tidings), one of the tablets designed to supplement the Kitáb-i-Aqdas, He ordained that “[i]n every country where any of this people reside, they must behave towards the government of that country with loyalty, honesty and truthfulness” (Tablets 22–23). During a political turmoil when the government had arrested a couple of Bahá’ís along with tens of people who possessed anti-governmental papers, He swore by the “Sun of Truth” that His followers were “sanctified” from “unseemly acts and reprehensible doings” and added that such deeds were acts of “the ignoble.” He then emphasized that His believers were “pro-state and pro-people” (dawlat-kháh va mil-lat-kháh) (Ishráqkhávarí, Má’idi-yi-Ásmání 4: 125–26, 133). Again, in

10 The original Persian of the passage appears in Bahá’u’lláh, Iqtídárát 324.
11 As we will see later, during the Constitutional Revolution, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá paraphrases these words of Bahá’u’lláh in tablets advising Bahá’ís to avoid interference in the conflicts.
12 For the historical details, see Yazdani, Awdá’-i-Ijtimá’i-i-Írán dar ’Ahd-i-Qájár 157–99.
13 There is historical evidence that
His tablet to Muḥammad Taqī-i-Najafi, He wrote,

> Every nation must have a high regard for the position of its sovereign, must be submissive unto him, must carry out his behests, and hold fast his authority. The sovereigns of the earth have been and are the manifestations of the power, the grandeur and the majesty of God. This Wronged One hath at no time dealt deceitfully with anyone. (Epistle 89–90)

And finally, He commanded in His will, the Kitáb-i-‘Ahdí:

> O ye the loved ones and the trustees of God! Kings are the manifestations of the power, and the daysprings of the might and riches, of God. Pray ye on their behalf. He hath invested them with the rulership of the earth and hath singled out the hearts of men as His Own domain. Conflict and contention are categorically forbidden in His Book. . . . It is incumbent upon everyone to aid those daysprings of authority and sources of command who are adorned with the ornament of equity and justice. (Tablets 221)

With this background, we can now turn to a study of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and the Constitutional Revolution. It goes without saying that as with any other research, what is presented is the result of the author’s findings based on the currently available sources.

‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ HEARS ABOUT THE MOVEMENT

As far as available sources indicate, among the events that soon came to be known as the Constitutional Revolution, the first thing on which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá commented was Muẓaffar-ru’d-Dīn Sháh’s issuing a statement ordering the formation of “a house of justice” (‘idálat-khánih). In a tablet—the first half of which is about a cholera outbreak that had been relatively short-lived in Iran as compared to nearby countries—‘Abdu’l-Bahá
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likely an indication of His disapproval of the confrontational ways in which “a house of justice” was demanded.14 As other tablets indicate, from the beginning of the Constitutional Revolution, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá received letters from prominent Bahá’ís, such as the Hand of the Cause Mullá ‘Ali-i-Akbar-i-Ayádí (Hájí Ákhund) notifying Him about the events unfolding in Iran.15 Apparently, some Bahá’ís expressed a wish to join the protests. Given the praises the Sháh and his prime minister for their virtues and their concern for the welfare of people. He then moves on to commend the two for having instituted in every city judicial courts where conflicts among people could be resolved and their rights secured. He recounts the positive consequences of this decision: it will bring comfort, and the cornerstone of the greatest civilization will be laid in Iran as it has in other regions, and “this is the beginning of the reform of the country.” Then, He expresses hope: “God willing, they will succeed in implementing [the decision], and the ignorant will abandon their shamelessness and obey the just laws.” He then moves on to another topic (Makâtib 4: 68–70; “Miláni Collection” 88–91). It is important to note that, at this stage, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá saw the development as a plan for judiciary reform. The formation of “a house of justice,” to which Muzaffarú’d-Din Sháh had just consented, was one of the demands of some two thousand protestors who had taken sanctuary (bast) at the Shrine of Sháh ‘Abdu’l-‘Azm in December 1905. At that point, still there was no expressed demand for a parliament or a constitution. Those demands came later, once the Sháh did not fulfill this promise (Kasraví 68; Browne 114; Bayat 114–15; Afary 52). The importance of the remark ‘Abdu’l-Bahá makes at the end must not be lost on us. His reference to “the ignorant” who, He hopes, will “abandon their shamelessness” is

14 While Juan Cole’s recognition of the relevance of this tablet to the early stages of what would later emerge as the Constitutional Revolution and his translation of this same tablet are most helpful, his decision to title his translation “‘Abdu’l-Baha on the Establishment of Civil Courts in Iran as a Prelude to the Inauguration of the first Iranian Parliament (Jan. 1906?” is ahistoric. As the text of the tablet shows, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá saw the decree as the first step to a purely judicial reform. At that stage, neither to Him, nor to others, could the formation of a judicial court have been regarded as a prelude to the parliament. In fact, even the inclusion of the item in the list of the requests of the bastis was incidental and, apparently, the result of the immediate improvising of Yahyá Dawlatábádí, who acted as one of the intermediaries between the protestors and the premier (Dawlatábádí 2:32).

15 This can be inferred from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s responses. See, for example, Ishráqkhávari, Má’idiy-i-Ásmáni 5:196.
emphasis in the Bahá’í Writings on the rule of law, on constitutionalism, and given the long history of persecution at the hands of the Qájárs, such tendencies were to be expected. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, faithful to the ethos created by Bahá’u’lláh, did not approve of a confrontational attitude vis-à-vis the government. He advised the Bahá’ís to remain impartial well-wishers of both sides. In a tablet addressing Mirzá Ḥasan-i-Ṭáliqání (Adíb), He writes,

In the beginning of the revolution, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá exerted the utmost effort to ensure that the friends remain impartial well-wishers of both sides. Some however distorted [my instructions] and interfered. . . . I summoned Jináb-i-Áqá Siyyid ‘Ali-Akbar16 and told him: ‘I wanted to prevent the friends from interfering but it wasn’t possible. Some insist on participating [in the revolution]. Their actions will have detrimental results.’ (Mázindarání, Asráru’l-Áthár 1:82–83)

16 The Hand of the Cause, Mullá ‘Ali-Akbar Ayádí, also known as Hájí Ákhúnd. For his biography, see ‘Alá’í 371–401.

17 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá has referred in other tablets to the advice He gave the friends “from the very beginning of the Revolution” (áz bidáyát-i-inqiláb) to not get involved in the strife. See, for example, Browne 428; Ishráqkhávari, Má’idiy-i-Ásmáni, 5:196.

Apparently, a number of Bahá’ís had difficulty understanding the logic behind His advice. As He indicates in another tablet, upon hearing His order to the friends to remain impartial, “some weak ones (ba’di du’afá) complained,” wondering why “a public uprising for the establishment of justice” should be “condemned and despised” (madhmúm va maqdúḥ) (Mázindarání, Amr va Khálq 4:442). Moojan Momen has shown that in Sári, Mázindarán, Bahá’ís did participate in the activities of the Constitutionalists (“The Bahá’ís and the Constitutional Revolution”). We also know that a few individuals, such as the Qájár prince, poet, and scholar, Shaykhu’r-Ra’ís (d. 1918),18 joined the protests. However, given the explicit texts of the tablet of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, which states otherwise (see below), such cases seem to have been exceptions to the rule. The majority of Bahá’ís obeyed ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s advice and remained practically impartial, even though they were naturally hoping for constitutionalism and the establishment of a parliament.19 As


19 For a firsthand record, see ‘Abdu’l-Ḥusayn Áyati (Ávárih)’s description of the situation, in Kaḵákib, 2:165. See also the later discussion of Mirzá Ḥasan-i-Adíb’s attitude.
is discussed later, the involvement of the ulamá and the Azalís were among the factors influencing ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s assessment of the Constitutional Revolution and the guidance He gave to His followers.

It has been suggested that during the early stages of the Constitutional Revolution, in 1906, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá advised Bahá’ís to support the movement, and it was only later, in 1907, that He changed His mind and guided them to withdraw.²⁰ This author has not found a single tablet from ‘Abdu’l-Bahá advising the friends to join the protests even in their early stages. His tablets and other primary available sources in fact state the contrary. Both in the early stages, and later during the time of the first majlis, He directed the Bahá’ís to abstain from participating in confrontational and violent activities.²¹ He extols and applauds this nonparticipation in words such as these:

Glorified be God, in this mass movement (ḥarakat-i-‘umúmi) in Iran, it became clear that not a single Bahá’í was in the instigating societies (anjumanha-yi mutahrikih), nay, all withdrew themselves, and did not interfere in political matters, and were obedient to the State and well-wishers of the Nation. Even among the crowd that took refuge in the honored embassy of Britain at the

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²⁰ See, for example, Amanat 42; Momen, “The Constitutional Movement and the Bahá’ís of Iran” 11; idem, “The Bahá’ís and the Constitutional Revolution” 353. Two sources have been used for this claim: Gail 32, and Afnán 556. Both sources indicate that in early 1907, when the conflict between the majlis and the Court had escalated, tablets of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá emphasized noninvolvement. This, however, does not mean that prior to this date ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had supported Bahá’ís joining the protests. In light of the evidence indicating that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, “from the very beginning,” advised Bahá’ís not to interfere in conflicts, His 1907 orders in this regard seem to be simply a forceful reiteration of previous guidance. Also, given how slow communication between Iran and Palestine was at the time, it could well be that some of the tablets written by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in early 1907 in actuality contained responses to questions Bahá’ís had posed much earlier on whether or not to get involved.

²¹ According to a Bahá’í contemporary to the movement, and a keen observer of developments, at the time of the formation of the first majlis, within the span of one year, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá issued from “one hundred and ninety to two hundred tablets” addressed to the Bahá’ís of Tehran. In “more than one hundred” of these tablets, He advised against “joining the anjumans, opposing the king, and interfering in political affairs,” commenting that “this majlis is not one concerned with the comfort and prosperity of people” (‘Aláqband 9).
wrote so many times. I saw that they do not understand... no matter how many times I wrote ‘obey the government of the time.’... Finally, I wrote, ‘To obey the Shah is to obey God’” (Afrúkhtih 535–36). What Ḥabíb Mu’ayyad has recorded clearly reflects both the fact that the majority of Iranian Bahá’ís refrained from participating in the conflicts with the government and that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was not happy with the action of those who did: “Frequently, and emphatically, I wrote them to refrain from interfering in politics. Praised be God that they did not interfere. That is why they are safe. If some of them were negligent (ghaflat kardand) and did interfere, they themselves suffered the harm (ḍurrash bi khud-i-ánhá várid shud).... I am very happy with those who did not interfere. That is why they are safe. If some of them were negligent (ghaflat kardand) and did interfere, they themselves suffered the harm (ḍurrash bi khud-i-ánhá várid shud).... I am very happy with those who did not interfere” (1:51). While as Bahá’u’lláh’s successor and the Center of His Covenant ‘Abdu’l-Bahá was no doubt an advocate of constitutionalism, His ideas on how to establish it were different from those advanced by activists in Iran. He believed that this goal had to be achieved and consolidated through discourse. He was adamant in rejecting a confrontational mode of action. Had the people requested the Sháh to establish a parliament, He wrote, “with humility, and dignity” (i.e., rather than protest), the Sháh would, of course, have accepted the request (“Milání Collection” 221–22). This leads us to discuss the kind of participation ‘Abdu’l-Bahá encouraged Bahá’ís to practice.

Furthermore, His references to other early events in the movement, for example, the bast of the ‘ulamá in Qum and their triumphant return to the city (Má’idiy-i-Ásmání 5:196), do not reveal any support for these events. It would seem, therefore, very unlikely that at the same time He could have been supportive of such moves.

The memoirs of Bahá’ís contemporaneous to the Constitutional Movement, such as those of Yúnis Khán-i-Afrúkh-tih and Ḥabíb Mu’ayyad, also clearly convey the sense that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá advised the believers from early on to avoid participating in the conflicts (Mu’ayyad 1:51; Afrúkh-tih 534–46). Furthermore, not only do these memoirs not tell us of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s “support” of the early stages of the movement or His encouragement of Bahá’ís to join the protests, but also they reveal His unhappiness with the insistence of a number of Bahá’ís in this regard: “I wrote them several times... Each time, they would respond back... I...”

22 Elsewhere, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá asserts that “not a single Bahá’í” could be found among the people who took refuge in the British Embassy “at the beginning of the troubles” (Makátib 4:177).

23 The event to which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá referred was the return of the ‘ulamá from Qum with the royal carriage sent to bring them back to Tehran. See Bayat 139.
‘*Abdu’l-Bahá Participates and Contributes*

In 1907, at the time of the first *majlis*, after Muhammad ‘Alí Sháh had ascended to the throne and the confrontation between the Constitutionalists and Royalists had worsened, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tried to reconcile the two sides and ordered the Bahá’ís to do the same. He also ordered them to share (*bi yumím-i-nás binámá’id*) the treatise He had written fourteen years earlier, the *Risáliy-i-Siyásiyyih*, in order to offer pertinent guidance to the people and the government. In the following pages, I discuss these two sets of actions as well as the issues of concern to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in the *Risáliy-i-Siyásiyyih* and in His tablets from the Constitutional period. First, an introduction to the *Risáliy-i-Siyásiyyih* is in order.

‘*Abdu’l-Bahá Guides and Warns: The *Risáliy-i-Siyásiyyih*’

‘*Abdu’l-Bahá wrote the *Risáliy-i-Siyásiyyih* in 1893 in the aftermath of the Tobacco Revolt.24 That He ordered this work be widely distributed or brought to the attention of people by the believers in Iran, both at that time and in 1907, demonstrates on the one hand the importance of the work in clarifying the Bahá’í position vis-à-vis the spreading political turmoil, and on the other hand the similarities He saw between the Tobacco Revolt and the Constitutional Movement, which have also been attested to by historians who describe the former as a “dress rehearsal” for the latter (Afary 17). Concerning the historical circumstances that led to the writing of this treatise, it suffices to say that, as previously mentioned, the Tobacco Revolt has been regarded as the first political movement in Iran’s history. In 1891, Náṣiri’d-Dín Sháh sold a monopoly for the production, sale, and export of Iranian tobacco to the British firm Talbot. This sale was canceled by 1892, in part because of a nationwide opposition and boycott spearheaded by merchants and the ‘ulamá, and in part because of Russian opposition. An exhaustive discussion of the *Risáliy-i-Siyásiyyih* is beyond the scope of this article. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s own description of it, however, is enlightening on its role and content. In a tablet dated 11 Jamádíyu’l-Úlá 1325 (June 22, 1907) He indicates that He had outlined in the work His general guidelines on the relations between the ruler and the ruled: “In that epistle, the sacred rights of the state and the protected (*mar’íyyih*) rights of the nation, the relationship between rulers and their subjects (*rá’í va ra’íyyat*), and the ties between those who govern and those who are governed, and the obligations of those who lead and those who are led have been set forth.” (The tablet appears at the

24 On *Risáliy-i-Siyásiyyih*, see Yazdani, “*Risáliy-i-Siyásiyyih.*”
Risáliy-i-Siyásiyyih was not the only way that 'Abdu'l-Bahá participated in the social discourse of that period; He also engaged more directly on a matter of immediate concern: the conflict between the court and the majlis.

As soon as the first majlis was formed, 'Abdu'l-Bahá expressed His concern over the possibility of a rift between it and the state. In fact, even in the tablet at the opening of this article the jubilant tone at its beginning contrasts with stating this worry at the end: “Pray that the nation obeys the government with utmost contentment, is submissive to the wise counsels of the attendants of the center of kingship, gives no heed to the whisperings of those who foment discord, does not rise up against the state, as the Russian Duma did, and does not affl ict the country with this enormous calamity (“Mílání Collection” 222).” 25

25 In an apparent attempt to vindicate his position that 'Abdu'l-Bahá supported the Constitutional Revolution in Iran at its early stages, Juan Cole relies simply on his translation of the first (the jubilant, congratulatory) part of this tablet (“Millennialism” 302). Unfortunately, in doing so, he omits two important passages that problematize his view. In the first of these, 'Abdu'l-Bahá expresses His distrust of the involvement of the ‘ulamá
proved that His concern was justified.

During the fierce conflicts between the majlis and Muḥammad-ʻAlī Shah, in addition to offering advice via the Risāliy-i-Siyāsīyyih, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá, as He recounted in later tablets, had also “secretly” (khāfiyyan) “counseled the parties to the utmost degree (bih ahzāb nahāyat-i-naṣāyiḥ mujrā gashṭ)” (Makātib 5:173). His emphasis at this time was on the paramount need for “the State and the Nation” to inter-

in the movement. Immediately after the sentences that Cole has chosen to quote, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá adds the conjunction “but” and goes on to write what has been cited above regarding the involvement of the ‘ulamá in the movement. In the second passage, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá reminds the reader of His support for obedience to the government by inviting him to “pray” that the nation will obey the state and the monarchy (“Miláni Collection” 222–23). Elsewhere, Cole translates the tablet in its entirety, without a precise rendering of a key sentence in which ‘Abdu'l-Bahá calls for the nation’s obedience to the court and the king: *tankin az ārāy-i-sā‘ibiy-i-mulázimán-i-markaz-i-salānāt kunad: “be submissive to the wise counsels of the attendants of the center of kingship” (provisional translation). Cole mistranslated this sentence as “will invest with authority the considered views of the public servants at the center of authority” (“‘Abdu'l-Baha Lauds”). Relying on Cole’s translation of this tablet, Kavian Milani writes of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá’s praise of the formation of the majlis “in strongest” and “glowing” terms (Milani “Bahá’í Discourses,” 147, 149), but fails to acknowledge that in the same tablet ‘Abdu'l-Bahá expresses His distrust of the movement because of the ‘ulamá’s involvement, and commands the Bahá’ís to obey the monarch—the latter explicit and clear in the original Persian. Elsewhere, Milani refers to a tablet of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá as containing the praise for the formation of the majlis (Milani, “Nihḍat-i-Maqhrūṭiyat”). The tablet Milani cites, however, does not contain any explicit reference to the majlis or constitutionalism.

In this tablet, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá simply praises the newly deceased Muẓaffarú’d-Dín Sháh for having been a “well-wisher of the Nation,” “just” and “kind,” while expressing hope that the new Sháh will follow in his father’s footsteps and “revive the State and Nation of Iran” (“Miláni Collection” 126).

Conflict between Muḥамad-ʻAlí Sháh and the majlis started at the beginning of his reign in January 1907 and led to his bombardment of the majlis on 23 June 1908 when the civil war and the period called “the Lesser Despotism” started. See Browne, The Persian Revolution, 133 ff.; Bayat, Iran’s First Revolution, 153–56, 215–31; Afary, The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 92–95, 133, 140.

The words He uses here (and in several other tablets with this theme) are “dawlat” and “millat.” While “millat” can be confidently translated as “nation,” (see Ashraf, “Iranian Identity”), some might find translating “dawlat” as “state” inaccurate. Browne, for example, preferred to render “dawlat” as “the Court” (428), apparently on account of the fact that in this particular context, ‘Abdu'l-Bahá was
mingle like “milk and honey” (shahd va shīr). He recounts that He had made this point “time and again, explicitly, with utmost clarity” in His letters to “both sides” of the conflict, that is, to the Monarch and his supporters on the one side, and to the Constitutionalists on the other. He warns that without such intermingling (intimate association) between the two sides, “prosperity” (falāḥ va najāḥ) would in no way be possible. Iran would be “ruined,” and most unfortunate of all, such a situation (conflict, rift, lack of unity, and open confrontation between the government and society) would inevitably lead to “neighboring” (mutajāvirih) countries interfering (mudākhilih) in Iran’s internal affairs. At one point, He even warns of possible encroachment by certain “transgressor” (mutajāvizih) states (Makātib 5:173). In other words, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá considers the organic unity of the State and the Nation a fundamental prerequisite not only for the progress of the country but also for its independence and its power to resist against the encroachments of the foreign powers. In His advice to both Muhammad ‘Ali Shāh and the Constitutionalists, He was, therefore, seriously concerned with the prosperity of the country and the protection of its integrity and independence.

basically referring to the king’s relationship with the majlis (and anjumans).

28 For another tablet containing the same themes, see “Tablets in Honor of Miláni” 66.

Thus, implicitly and explicitly, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s stance in fostering unity between the State and the Nation was—to use a more contemporary term—“anticolonial.” It was anticolonial in its soft but strong defense and advocacy of conditions that He believed were conducive to preserving the integrity of the country, as opposed to the harsh and violent ways that characterized the interaction between the government and society at the time. The turn of events proved the validity of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s concerns. Foreign intervention that had existed since the early nineteenth century—against which Bahá’u’lláh Himself had warned—increased remarkably with the chaos that overtook the country during and in the aftermath of the Revolution. In their 1907 convention, the Russians and the British divided Iran into respective spheres of influence, allocating northern Iran to Russia and the southwest to Britain. In 1909, the

29 In a 1891 tablet, Bahá’u’lláh laments the rising influence of foreign powers in Iran, predicting cryptically that “erelong the two fingers will join” (Ishrāqkhāvari, Mā’idi-y-i-Ásmáni 4:36; qtd. in Mázindarání, Amr va Khālq 4:438). In commenting on this passage, the Bahá’í scholar Fádil-i-Mázindarání suggests that that “the two fingers” refers to two foreign powers whose influence from the north and the south would ultimately rob Iran of any chance of national autonomy (Asrāru’l-Athár 1:144).
Russians occupied Azerbaijan on the pretext of establishing law and order. In December 1911, they occupied the rest of their zone, including Tehran. Foreign encroachment intensified during World War I, and by 1920, Iran was, in the words of one prominent contemporary historian, a “classic failed state” (Abrahamian 62). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá found such confrontation and conflict counterproductive to the fortunes of the country. It is interesting to note that many years later, a leading radical figure among the Constitutionalists, Siyyid Ḥasan Taqízádih, regretted not having taken a more reconciliatory stance. In the words of historian Katouzian, “it is instructive that, of all the people, Taqízádih, the then intellectual tribune of the radical revolutionaries, expressed profound regret, in his old age, to a close friend for his total rejection of the Sháh’s offer of a return to constitutional regime short of his deposition” (186).

What Did ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Urge the Bahá’ís to Do?

‘Abdu’l-Bahá instructed the Bahá’ís to work to reconcile the two sides of the conflict: “the Friends of God must try to unify the state and the nation (dar ta’lif-i-dawlat va millat kúshand), so that they may heal [the rift between the two] (iltíyám bakhshand). If they are unable to do so, then they should withdraw (kinárih gírand)” (Makátib 5:173). Whom exactly from both sides did ‘Abdu’l-Bahá counsel in private, and in what ways did the Bahá’ís attempt to “heal” relations are two of the questions that will need to be answered more fully by future research, but we do have some ideas in this regard. We do know that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá wrote a number of tablets to Muḥammad ‘Alí Sháh advising him on the importance of intermingling (ámíkhtan) the Court with the Nation (by which He basically meant the parliament representing the Nation and the anjumans supporting it in provinces). These tablets were written at a time when anti-constitutionalist ‘ulamá such as Shaykh Faḍlu’llah Núrí (d. 1909) “were fully supportive of the monarch’s right to rule and opposed to the majlis decision to have him simply reign like his British counterpart” (Bayat 262). We also know that at least one of the Hands of the Cause, Mírzá Ḥasan Adíbu’l-‘Ulamá (d. 1919), was in close association with some of the main constitutionalist figures. He was a scholar and one of the founders of the Tarbíyat School in Tehran. Because of his background and the elite social level he occupied, his circle of acquaintances included some eminent clerics and laymen. We know his constitutionalist friends had great respect
for him, considered him an erudite and open-minded person, and even solicited his opinion on issues (Suhráb 65). Given his rank, he was regularly in contact with ‘Abdu’l-Bahá and may have served as a conduit through which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá conveyed messages to the Constitutionalists. The autobiography of ‘Ináyatu’lláh Suhráb, one of Adíbú’l-‘Ulamá’s contemporaries who attended his classes, provides a rare window to the mentality of a seasoned and deepened Bahá’í (most probably directly guided by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá) about the Constitutional Revolution.32 According to Suhráb, Adíbú’l-‘Ulamá fundamentally disagreed with the constitutionalists’ radical, adventurous, and extremist spirit, and believed that in order to establish constitutionalism, proper tools and instruments must first be provided. Instead of contending with the Court and seditious instigation, what must be done is to educate people who can understand the principles of constitutionalism and put them into practice. He constantly advised his constitutionalist friends to establish schools and educate people. (Suhráb 66)

From Adíb’s point of view, as Suhráb tells us, overthrowing despotism without there being an upright alternative (qá’imqám-i-sálih) would lead to the return of despotism. “New people,” he thought, “must be trained for implementing new principles.” At the same time, Adíb was caring and sensitive about the plight of people and felt sorry for those who lost their lives in the struggle for constitutionalism. At one point, he quoted himself having told his son who had been comfortably sleeping, “Get up and see how hundreds like you, with thousands of dreams and wishes, have died on the road between Karaj and Tehran, their corpses rotting under the piercing sun!” (Suhráb 66).

OBEYDENCE TO THE GOVERNMENT AND NON-INTERFERENCE IN PARTISAN POLITICS

Central to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s thought about the proper way to advocate for constitutionalism was the principle of obedience to the legal government of the time. As was discussed previously, early in the Revolution, He indicated that constitutionalism should have been sought through peaceful dialogue with the monarch.33 In the Risáliy-i-Siyásíyyih, after quoting passages from Bahá’u’lláh’s writings on

32 I am grateful to Keyvan Mahjoor for graciously sharing with me an electronic copy of Suhráb’s autobiography.

33 See earlier, under section “‘Abdu’l-Bahá Hears about the Movement.” The tablet appears in “Milání Collection” 221–22.
respect and obedience to kings and rulers (11–17) in almost identical terms, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá exhorted the Bahá’ís to obey the government and the state:

All must be humble and submissive before the government and obedient before the throne. In obeying and serving the rulers, they must be sincere subjects and eager servants (10–11).

. . . Wherefore, O friends of God, strive with heart and soul! Through pure intention and genuine desire, display the power of good-will toward the government and obedience to the State. This most important of commands is one of the ordinances of the lucid faith of God (fará’id-i-din-mubín), set down irrevocably in decisive tablets from the realm of glory. (17; emphasis added)

Following His analogy of the government as the head and the people as the body, and emphasizing the “reciprocal rights” (huqúq mutabádil) and “balanced affairs” (shu’ún mutá’ádil) between the two, He asserted that once the government performs its role as the protector (rá’í) of the people, and the people obey the government, their relationship would be healed (50).

Likewise, during the Constitutional Revolution, in many tablets, both in the early stages of the movement and later, after the formation of the first majlis, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá exhorted the Bahá’ís to obey the government. For example, in a tablet that appears to have been written in 1906,34 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá reminds the addressees (“the Spiritual Friends of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá”) that “the Abhá Beauty has destroyed the foundations of contention and conflict” and has ordered obedience to “just kings” so that the friends may be kind to all the people of the world and “obey the government with the utmost sincerity” (“Mílání Collection” 188).35 In another tablet, written sometime between January 1907 and June 1908—the time of the conflict between the court and the majlis—the theme of obedience to the government is directly connected to the principle of noninterference in politics. In this tablet, in which He refers to the “turbulence” (ighetishásh) in Iran, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá hopes for a healthy and strong relationship between the State and the Nation and desires for the king to reign with the utmost power and protect his subject. Then, He guides the Bahá’ís thus: “The friends of God must remain calm and composed and abstain from interfering in political

34 The tablet contains a reference to the structure of the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár of Ashgabat being in the process and getting close to completion. The structure of the Mashriqu’l-Adhkár of Ashgabat was completed in 1906, even though the external ornamentation took much longer (Badiee et al.).

35 Tablets with similar themes are numerous.
be understood in light of these two principles. At a time when the confrontational nature of activities made that advocacy for constitutionalism was tantamount to opposing a still legitimate government, He advised the friends to withdraw. During the formation of the second Parliament, after the new government had been legally established, and participation (in politics) no longer meant partisan activity against a legal government, He encouraged the believers to send the Hands of the Cause to the majlis to play an active role and contribute to the betterment of the country as their representatives.

39 Milani has argued that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá based His decisions on developments in party politics inside Iran (“Bahá’í Discourses” 151), and changes to electoral laws (“Nihḍat-i-Mashrúṭíyyat”). Neither explanation seems plausible to this author: the former in no way encouraged Bahá’ís membership, while the newly amended laws continued to exclude Bahá’ís.

36 Examples of other tablets with similar content written during this time period are found on pages 117 and 224 of the same manuscript.

37 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is paraphrasing here the words of Bahá’u’lláh in the Tablet of Bishárat quoted earlier in this article.

38 Cole ascribes ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s urging Bahá’ís to attempt to send the Hands of the Cause to the parliament, to the time right after the Constitution was signed, i.e., the first parliament (“Millennialism” 302). This is a particularly unfortunate error, because the tablet in which He makes that command (Makáṭib 2:257–63) belongs to the second Constitutional period, that is the time after the Lesser Despotism, which Cole asserts was when ‘Abdu’l-Bahá started to mandate that Bahá’ís dissociate themselves from the Constitutionalists, as a protective measure (“Millennialism” 302). It was based on such historical errors that Cole concluded, incorrectly, that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá did not advocate non-involvement in politics as a principle, throughout this period. (“Millennialism” 302-303).

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40 Soon thereafter, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá
‘Abdu’l-Bahá Warns against the Interference of the ‘Ulamá in Political Matters

One of the major factors that influenced ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s opinion of the Iranian Constitutional Revolution seems to have been the role played by the ‘ulamá. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá had already expressed, in unequivocal language, His total rejection of the interference of the ‘ulamá in political issues. In fact, the “summary” of the Risáliy-i-Siyásíyyih, as He Himself puts it, is that “the interference of the ‘ulamá in political matters will have utterly destructive and harmful detriments (maḍarrát-i-kulliy-ihi)” (qtd. in Ishráqkhávarí, Muḥádirát 2:786–87). In the Risáliy-i-Siyásíyyih, He draws a wall of separation between the responsibilities of the clergy and those of the state:

The duty of the doctors and divines is… to attend to the matters of the spirit and to promote the attributes of the All-Merciful. Whenever the leaders of God’s glorious Religion

changed His mind and ordered the Bahá’ís to forget about becoming members of parliament. Several factors, including the fact that the majlis had for all practical measures been reduced to a theater of conflict, accounted for this change. A memorandum from the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice explains the details (see Yazdani, Awdá’-i-Ijtímá’i-i-Írán 434). and the pillars of His mighty Law have intervened in political affairs, and designed schemes and devised plans, it hath inevitably shattered the unity of the believers and scattered the ranks of the faithful; the flame of sedition hath been kindled and the fire of hostility hath consumed the world; the country hath been pillaged and plundered; and the people have fallen into the hands of the mediocré. (Universal House of Justice, n. pag.)

41 In this same authorized translation, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá is quoted as saying, “Were ye to refer to history, ye would find countless similar instances, each and all due to the interference of religious leaders in political affairs. These souls are meant to issue the ordinances of God, not to enforce them. That is, whenever the government inquirëth of them, in matters of greater or lesser consequence, concerning the exigencies of the law of God and the true purport of His ordinances, they should set forth that which hath been deduced from His laws and is consonant with His religion. Beyond this, what can they know of political matters, of the protection of the subjects, the management of important affairs, the welfare and prosperity of the nation, the administration of the laws and statutes of the realm, and of internal and external issues?” (Universal House of Justice n. pag.). The original passages appear in Risáliy-i-Siyásíyyih 20–21, 29–30.
‘Abdu’l-Bahá supports this position by citing four historical episodes (three from Iran and one from the Ottoman Empire) in which the interference of the clerics in politics irretrievably harmed the country (Risáliy-i-Siyásiyih 19–29). He expresses His astonishment at the fact that individuals who “are inept at managing their small homes and nests, and putting their houses in order, and who are uninformed about both themselves and others, interfere in the most important affairs of the country and its people” (Risáliy-i-Siyásiyih 29).

Having made His points on this issue clear, it is not surprising to find that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá did not expect much to be achieved by a political movement in which clerics had a leading role. During the Constitutional Revolution, in addition to disapproving the mode of action, He was also pessimistic about the results of the interference of the ‘ulamá in political matters, as He had mentioned a decade earlier in His Risáliy-i-Siyásiyih. He expressed this concern from the very beginning. In a letter addressed to all of the Bahá’ís of Iran, dated 23 Jamádíyu’l-‘Ulá 1324 (15 July 1906), He mentioned hearing that “a number of the Uṣúlí ‘ulamá and Shaykhi divines” were “instigating sedition” (tahrík-i-fisád) and had “rebelled” against the government in a fit of “rage and enmity.” He regretted that the ‘ulamá did not leave the “kind king” alone so that the latter may implement reforms “willingly and by natural inclination” (bi širáfat-i-ṭab’ va ṭib-i-kháṭir) (Miláni Collection 135–36). As mentioned earlier, in His response to the letter from Washington, DC, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá joyfully averred that the formation of the majlis was in accordance with the explicit text of the Most Holy Book. However, He was quick to add, “Apparently, leaders from the ‘ulamá who love only themselves are involved,” and expressed His doubts that the ‘ulamá were genuinely interested in improving the lives of people and promoting knowledge. At the end, as we saw earlier, He also emphasized obedience to the government (Miláni Collection, 222–23). ‘Abdu’l-Bahá observed a blatant contradiction between the clergy’s public promotion of progressive ideas and social freedoms and their private lives of circumscription and conservative values: “How can someone who is a promoter of despotism and against freedom in his own home call for constitutionalism and liberty [in society]?” (qtd. in Zarqání 2:105). He also did not trust the motivation of these leaders of the movement: “Iranians did not realize that even though constitutionalism is good, those who are pushing for it are after their own personal interests” (qtd. in Zarqání 2:105).

42 Through a prominent Bahá’í, Jináb-i-Amin (Abú’l-Ḥasan Ardikání).
It was not only the leadership of the ‘ulamá to the movement that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá found problematic; the heavy presence and influence of the Azalis, the followers of Bahá’u’lláh’s rival brother, in the movement was also a cause of concern. The collaboration between the ‘ulamá and Azalis who practiced taqiyyih (dissimulation) and presented themselves as Muslims—in some cases as Shi’í clerics—was not a promising one as far as the situation of the Bahá’ís of Iran was concerned, particularly with the memory of the 1903 pogrom still fresh in their minds. In a tablet to the Spiritual Assembly of Tehran, written during the Lesser Despotism, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá reveals the extent of the danger posed by the two groups in the first majlis:

Consultation is one of the greatest divine institutions, but it must be based on the fear of God and the intention to promote the well-being of all (khayr-khwáhí-i-‘umúmí). The majlis, however, was in the hand of the wicked ‘ulama (‘ulamá’-i-sú’) and the followers of the unfaithful Yahyá, and [their] goal was utmost oppression and dominance, and they would ultimately have arisen to cut down the Blessed Tree. (“Miláni Collection” 229–30; emphasis added)

In the tablet to Mírzá Ahmad-i-Qá’iní, which was referred to previously in passing, He recounts His impression about the participation of the Azalis (to whom He always refer by the more accurate epithet “Yaḥyáyí”) in the majlis, and the ways in which this could pose a threat to the Bahá’ís. In this tablet, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá provides a summary of His views, insights and predictions from the beginning of the Revolution to the end of the Lesser Despotism, and final defeat of Muḥammad ‘Alí Sháh. When He comes to the formation of the first majlis, referring to the radical Yaḥyáyí who found their way in the majlis, He says,

Some of the Yahyáyí achieved complete influence (nufúdh-i-tám) over the majlis and acted seditiously. They caused conflict between the state and the nation up to the point when they became determined to dethrone the king and to instate another person. ‘Abdul-Bahá wrote to the Spiritual assembly of Tehran, in explicit terms, that the state will succeed and the majlis will be dispersed.
due to the sinister sedition of the Yahyáyíís. (qtd. in Ishráqkhávari, 
Muhádirát 3:198; Sulaymání 4:552)

He then continues to say how the Yahyáyíís mocked this explicit prediction by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá until the majlis was dispersed and the Yahyáyíís lost their cause, and could not change the kingship to the person from whom “they had received huge bribes” for the purpose (qtd. in Ishráqkhávari, 
Muhádirát 3:198; Sulaymání 4:552). At the end of this tablet, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá explains that the choices He made at the beginning of the Revolution had to do with the fact that

the leaders of the nation, due to the machination of the shameless Yahyáyíís, were all against the friends [i.e., the Bahá’ís]. Therefore, if we had mentioned the name of constitutionalism, the government also would have arisen as an enemy. . . . The friends would have been scapegoated (sharfu’l-musálihih) between the two sides. . . . Those on the side of

the government would have started killing, and those on the side of the nation [millatiyyán, i.e., the Constitutionalists] also would have assisted. (qtd. in Ishráqkhávari, 
Muhádirát 3:200; Sulaymání 4:556)

During the course of the Constitutional Revolution, as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá tells us in many of His tablets, Yahyáyíís did their best to endanger Bahá’ís by portraying them to each camp as the supporters of their rivals. Before the original victory of constitutionalism, to Royalists they said Bahá’ís were Constitutionalists and later they told the Constitutionalists, now in power, that Bahá’ís were supporting despotism. In one of His tablets published by Edward Browne in The Persian Revolution: 1905-1909, He writes, “Yahyáyi Bábís who are the enemies of Bahá’ís and conceal themselves behind the veils [allusion to the practice of taqiyyih], tell the supporters of the nation [millatian, the Constitutionalists] that Bahá’ís are supporters of the state, and tell the supporters of the state [i.e., the Royalists] that Bahá’ís sacrifice themselves for the nation” (qtd. in Browne 427). Their goal, He adds, is to instigate both sides against the Bahá’ís and find supporters for themselves (Browne 427). After the formation of different parties and

44 Elsewhere, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá makes it clear that the person who bribed the Yahyáyís to support him was Zillu’s-Sulţán, the uncle of Muhammad ‘Alí Sháh, and the eldest son of Náṣíri’dd-Dín Sháh (Ishráqkhávari, Má’ idiy-i-Ásmání, 5:225–26).

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During the period of the second majlis (inaugurated in 1909), Yahyáís likewise alleged that Bahá’ís supported the party opposite to the one in power, at any given time. These “calumniators,” ‘Abdu’l-Bahá laments, “have made their way deep into different groups and do not allow Iran to repose, and do whatever sedition they want” (Ishráqkhávari, Má’id-i-Ásmání 5:226).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá is Worried Bahá’ís Will Be Scapegoated

From the beginning of what came to be the Constitutional Revolution, one of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s concerns was that the Bahá’ís in Iran might be scapegoated in the midst of the conflicts, similar to what had occurred during the 1903 pogrom in Isfahan and Yazd and some other parts of Iran, when political rivalries and conflicts provided the ground for scapegoating Bahá’ís, leading to their murder, plunder, and raid by mobs.46 Yunis Kháñ Afrúkhtí, who was in ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s presence at the time, recorded ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s apprehension (tashvísh va nigarání) in this regard (535). In a tablet revealed some time later to Adíb, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá Himself wrote that at the beginning of the Revolution, when some Bahá’ís did not take His advice of noninterference at face value, interpreted His words [according to their whims], and partook in the events, He became worried that the government would use their participation as an excuse to scapegoat the Bahá’ís, massacre them, and increase its power and influence in the process (Mázindarání, Asráru’l-Áthár 1:82–83). In another tablet addressed to Mírzá Ahmad Qá’iní, apparently written after the end of the Lesser Despotism (June 1908–May 1909)47 and the restoration of the constitution, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá makes the same point: “at the beginning, in order to protect the friends we showed forbearance (mudará kardím)” (qtd. in Muḥádirát 3:200; Sulaymání 4:556).48 Yunis

46 On 1903 pogrom, see Yazdani, “Religious Contentions,” 75–102.

47 On the period of the Lesser Despotism, see Browne 196–292; Bayat 232–60; Afary 209–54.

48 Touraj Amini, in his otherwise precise work, dates this tablet to the Lesser Despotism (which suggests a very different context, hence understanding) (Amini, Ta’ámul-i-Aqalíyyáth-i-Madhhabí 37). The content of the tablet, however, makes it clear that, as mentioned above, it was written after the defeat of Muhammad ‘Ali Sháh, end of the Lesser Despotism, and at beginning of the second Constitutional period. In what can be regarded as an overview of His guidance during the different stages of the Constitutional period, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá mentions how, during the period when Muḥammad ‘Ali Sháh was defeating his opponents in majlis (i.e., during the Lesser Despotism), He advised the Sháh in writing to act justly and punish...
Khán also records that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá told him that had He not prevented the friends from interfering, not only would they have been massacred, but constitutionalism would have failed (mujrā nimishud) (536). While, of course, an analysis of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s orientation toward the Iranian Constitutional Revolution at this point has to be taken into account, its significance should not overshadow the importance of other factors mentioned earlier. In other words, in light of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s general guidance on the interaction with the government and His assessment of the situation, it is safe to assume that had danger not been threatening the lives of Bahá’ís, He would have encouraged Bahá’ís to take part, but only within the parameters established in Bahá’u’lláh’s writings and His own tablets.

‘ABDU’L-BAHÁ BELIEVED IRANIANS NEEDED TO BE FIRST PREPARED FOR CONSTITUTIONALISM

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s oral statements regarding the Iranian Constitutional Revolution also indicate that He thought some cultural preparation, particularly at the moral-ethical level—that pertaining to the realm of values—was necessary for constitutionalism to have a healthy, lasting life in Iran. The chronicler of His journeys in the West recorded His comments that Iranians “should, at least, pay attention to the history of the civilized nations,” and then gave the example of France, where first a government based on law was established so that under the rule of law that nation acquires the capacity for progress. Iranians, He added, by virtue of their inexperience and their ignorance of the rule of law (az qanún bí khabar), were not ready for the “protection” (muḥāfīzih) and “promulgation” (tarvij) of the constitutional government (Zarqání 2:104–5). He asserted that “a change in the conduct of people” was needed “for the capacity for constitutionalism . . . to be acquired” (Zarqání 2:29).

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s reference to the “civilized nations” should not be misunderstood. Commenting on the Iranian Constitutional Revolution elsewhere, He is reported to have said about the revolutionaries that their quest for “civilization” (madaníyyat) was good, provided that it was based
on “heavenly character” (akhlāq-i-rahmānī). “Material civilization” that was about “cannons,” “guns,” and “the means of destruction” was not real civilization. He asserted, “If there is divine civilization, naturally there will be material civilization as well.” Then He made it clear what He meant by “divine civilization.” He recounted the story of the trustworthiness of a sixth-century Arab Jew in Syria who, in his resolve to protect that which the poet Imru’l-Qays had entrusted with him, resisted the local ruler who wanted to take Imru’l-Qays’s property, to the extent that his own son was killed in the struggle. Having recounted this story, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá asserted, “now, in which part of Europe can one find such a civilization?” (Mu’ayyad 1:50–51).

What ‘Abdu’l-Bahá saw as necessary, therefore, was first and foremost a change at the level of values. This is much in line with Adīb’s advice to his constitutionalist friends mentioned earlier, which makes one think the former in his communications with the latter was, in fact, conveying ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s guidance.

For ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, the real change of moral-ethical character would come as a result of spiritual rejuvenation. It is in this light that one must see ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s plan for sending the Bahá’í scholar Asadu’lláh Fāḍil-i-Mázindaráni (d. 1957)49 to Mullá Muḥammad Kázim-i-Khurásání (d. 1911),50 one of the three high-ranking Najaf-residing Shi’i clerics supportive of constitutionalism, during the time of the second majlis.51 In at least two tablets both addressed to the Hand of the Cause Muhammad Taqí Ibn Abhar,52 ‘Abdu’l-Bahá ordered that Fāḍil-i-Mázindaráni be sent to Najaf to meet with Khurásání. He gave detailed instructions on how Fāḍil had to behave in the expected meeting: respectful and wise. The message to be given to the high-ranking cleric was, in fact, an invitation to accept the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh as the only remedy to the materialistic trend! Fāḍil was to tell him that clearly the power of the ‘ulamá was in decline. All the people were going to become “Europeanized” (Urúpá-mashrāb) and be primarily concerned with “the prosperity of this world” (āsáyish-i-ín jahán), and in a short time religion would be forgotten as had happened in Europe, unless the hearts and souls be revived and freed by “the breaths of the Holy Spirit” and “a new dispensation appears” (Mázindaráni, Zuhúru’l-Ḥaqq 50 See Hairi, Murata, “Aḵūnd Ḵorāsānī.”

51 On this period, see Afary 255–83. The second Constitutional Period started with the inauguration of the second majlis in November 1909 and ended with its closure in late December 1911.

52 See Lambden, “Ebn Abhar, Moḥammad-Taqī.”
History is about change over time, but change makes sense only if there is continuity, as well. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s response to the change that was happening in Iran during the Constitutional Revolution had a continuity, that is, acting within the framework established by Bahá’u’lláh, at the center of which was a belief in the power of discourse to change sociopolitical conditions and to reject violence as a means of sociopolitical ends. Based on the documents available so far, this narrative can be put forth with regard to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s orientation toward the Constitutional Revolution in Iran. From the beginning of the movement in 1906, He was concerned with the possibility of Bahá’ís being again scapegoated and massacred in the midst of the political conflicts, as had occurred in 1903. Also, based on the teachings of Bahá’u’lláh, He did not approve a confrontational attitude toward the government as a way of seeking political ends, even (or maybe particularly) with a cause as sublime as constitutionalism. In fact, as demonstrated by the passages from Bahá’u’lláh quoted earlier, the principles of obedience to one’s government and non-involvement in partisan politics are both rooted in His own writings, and were not instituted by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Requests for the establishment of constitutionalism, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá believed, had to be
posed in a peaceful way. This explains why there is no evidence of Him having “supported” the movement in its early phase in 1906. His numerous tablets in 1907, calling on the friends to reconcile the two sides of the conflict (the court and the majlis) and to withdraw if unsuccessful, should be considered, therefore, merely as a more emphatic reiteration of the same guidance as before, made necessary as the conflicts between the two sides aggravated.

Again, based on ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s own tablets, the majority of Bahá’ís followed His orders and remained impartial. The cases of Bahá’ís joining the activities of the Constitutionalists should be regarded, therefore, as exceptions to the rule. It can be said that Adíbu’l-'Ulamá’s attitude, described earlier in this article, wraps up the general Bahá’í attitude toward the Constitutional Movement: sympathy for the legitimate demands of the people but choosing to act toward a long-term, fundamental change according to the Bahá’í teachings, for example, through education.

While rejecting confrontational and violent sociopolitical action, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá did take part in social action by both propagating His guidance in the Risáliy-i-Siyásiyyih, through His attempts, both publicly and secretly, to reconcile the two sides of the conflict, and by ordering Bahá’ís to promote unity and abstain from violence.

Also of great importance was His serious concern for the integrity and independence of the country and His warning against the increasing danger of the encroachments from the neighboring states (Russia in the north and Britain from the South), should the two sides not reconcile. Sadly, the course of history only proved the validity of His concerns.

In addition to disapproving the mode of action of the Constitutionalists, there were two other factors that caused Him to be suspicious of the movement: the leadership of the clerics, which He saw as detrimental to any political cause, and the deep involvement of the Yahyáyís, who had every intention to inflict harm upon the Bahá’ís. The joint collaboration of these two groups only increased His worry about the possibility of Bahá’ís being scapegoated. Had there not been such a fear, He might have taken another path, but, we can be certain, it would have been compatible with the violence-renouncing Bahá’í ethos in supporting the nation’s quest for constitutionalism, as His remarks at the end of the Lesser Despotism imply.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s instruction to send the Hands of the Cause to the majlis as representatives of the Bahá’í community sheds light on the relationship between the principle of obedience to the legal government of time and the policy of noninterference in partisan politics as its corollary. After the establishment of the second majlis, once the Constitutional government was the established, legal government with no
conflicts between the majlis and the Court, requesting membership in the parliament as representatives of a religious minority was fully compatible with the principle of obedience to the government.

For ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, real change for Iran, as elsewhere, would come through a spiritual rejuvenation of people through the Revelation of Bahá’u’lláh. The content of the message He sought to convey to the lead constitutionalist cleric in Najaf clearly illustrates this point. Using metaphoric language in one of the tablets of the Constitutional Period, He expressed—in a nutshell—what can be regarded as the philosophy behind the Bahá’í principle of noninvolvement in partisan politics:

He who seeks to promote universal peace and serve the world of humanity does not involve himself in a conflict waging in one corner of the world. He who works to revive a nation does not fight with the peasant in some village over the affairs of a farm. Once the country flourishes, every farm will be revived and every desolate land will prosper. (Ishráqkhávari, Má’idiy-i-Ásmání 5:65)

Meanwhile, in the long and gradual transitional process between the current stage of the world and the Golden Age of Bahá’u’lláh (what Bahá’ís call the processes of the Lesser Peace), Bahá’ís are charged to work for the betterment of people’s lives and to create a more just society—in ways and methods compatible with Bahá’í ethos—much as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá did in His attempt to reconcile between the majlis and the Court. This can also be thought of as the essence of the 2 March 2013 letter of the Universal House of Justice elucidating the Bahá’í attitude toward politics. Having expounded the Bahá’í view of history and the dimensions of the contribution of Bahá’í community to the civilization building process, the Universal House of Justice encourages the Bahá’í to collaborate with others “to transform society and further the cause of unity, promote human welfare, and contribute to world solidarity.” Meanwhile, they remind the reader of the principle in the Bahá’í teachings “that means should be consistent with ends; noble goals cannot be achieved through unworthy means.” A practical case of acting according to such guidance from the Universal House of Justice happened a couple years earlier than this message. The open letter written by the Bahá’ís of Egypt to the people of that country, in April 2011, seems to follow ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s example and can in turn be regarded as the proper contemporary model for the contribution of Bahá’ís to social change elsewhere (The Bahá’ís of Egypt n. pag.).

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53 This framework calls to mind what legal scholar Lessig calls social
Bahá’í community calls for achieving “consensus on the operating principles that are to shape a new model” for their society. Once this agreement is reached, they suggest that “the policies that follow are more likely to attract the support of the population whom they affect.” In their discussion of principles, they assert, “A mature society demonstrates one feature above all else: a recognition of oneness of all humanity. Far from being an expression of vague and pious hope, this principle informs the nature of those essential relationships that must bind all the states and nations as members of one human family.” The acceptance of this principle, they emphasize, “would require an organic change in the structure of present-day society, a change with far-reaching consequences for every aspect of our collective life.” They suggest initiating “a process of consultation about the principles that are to inform the reshaping” of their society:

In such a broadly based national conversation—engaging people at all levels, in villages and in cities, in neighborhoods and in the home, extending to the grassroots change at the level of “meanings,” and what Roshan Danesh has convincingly applied to the context of Bahá’í contribution to social change at the initial level. See Roshan Danesh and Lex Musta, “Some Reflections on Bahá’í Approaches to Social Change.”

(The Bahá’ís of Egypt n. pag.)
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