A Love of Iran

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What is a homeland? Our homeland is the first predetermined fact of our reality—a purely
involuntary aspect of our existence that serves nonetheless as the basis of our voluntary and
intentional actions. It is from our homeland that we turn to every other place in the world,
from which we reach out to every realm of conceptual significance, and beyond it to the
hidden dimension of inner meaning.

Where is our homeland? It is not only the place, but also the time of our birth and those of our
ancestors, and thus our historical beginning. In both this “time” and this “place,” the world
takes shape in our presence, and even prior to our presence, yet in connection to us. It orders
our experience and is our initial establishment in the world through language, as well as the
sphere of language itself and the conceptual connections it makes.

The world is thus divided: the world without us, meaning history; and the world with us,
meaning the shape our homeland takes for us—the beginning of one’s closeness and kinship
with the spirit of a country. Our homeland itself, however, was still a homeland—that of our
ancestors—even without us. Hence, it is the place where our presence and absence intersect,
and it contains the two within itself. How many are the difficult problems that have been
brought about without our presence—indeed, our origination—affecting our existence with
the shadows they cast! Our homeland immerses us in itself and its problems.

Even at critical moments in history, it often puts our existence in danger. In those instances, what was once a refuge becomes a hazard, making clear who is loyal to it and who is a traitor. Our homeland, therefore, precedes us and predominates us. Our homeland is our first shelter and refuge. The spirits of our contemporaries and our ancestors dwell there in various forms—in language, culture, sights and sounds, ethnic perspectives, taboos and mores, sensibilities, historical emphases, involuntary metamorphoses—in a single phrase, the sui generis world that is one's country.

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This article was originally published with the title "Mihr-i-Írán" in Ayda Haghtalab (ed.), 'Abdu'l-Bahá dar Anjuman-i-'Álam (Taslimi Foundation: Santa Monica, California, 1400 Shamsí [2021]), pp. 53–60.

In leaving our homeland, and in changing our surroundings in the process, our homeland stays within us, in proportion to our capacity, and comes along with us side by side, in our linguistic sphere, for a long time—right through to the end. And yet, despite all this, people always leave something of themselves behind, something noble, in their native homeland. Our homeland is a place that we can never fully leave, or find again with everything intact, for it touches every place where we come to reside. Wherever in the world we may be, we will inevitably see it and understand it through the prism of our homeland. Our attachment to our homeland is our link to the beginning—to that which predates us, and whose preexistence and priority to us is inevitable. Although it has begun with us, it has also preceded us. Our homeland, then, is a necessary and inescapable link. How can one be oblivious of one's starting point and not neglect oneself in so doing?

Since the concept of “homeland” is linked with “the beginning of all beginnings” and the presence of “self,” it takes on a connection with the concept of negligence. We can be unconscious of our homeland, and thus not be preoccupied with it from the outset—to neither speak of it nor hear of it—but in such a case, we will have lost a determining link with the world of our lives and grown apart from our own selves. Our connection with our homeland is a connection to a place in the world, but not just any place. It is to a place in the world that breaks the sameness and uniformity of all its other places. It is the most “otherly,” the most dearly cherished place on earth. Even if we take up residence somewhere better in the world, it is in comparison to our homeland that that place is “better.” Hence, our homeland is the standard. We do ourselves a disservice by being unmindful of attachment to our homeland. It is this very attachment that is always with us. Wherever in the world we may be, it does not leave us to ourselves; it calls us to itself.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá was Iranian; He remained Iranian, and, accompanied by a group of Iranian exiles in His place of banishment, He was always preoccupied with Iran. Negligence of the state of His homeland had no place for Him. He wrote and said many things about Iran, including a few specific treatises. He once affirmed, “Although I left Iran sixty years ago, I am still not content to renounce even the smallest of Iranian customs. The Bahá’ís adore Iran. They do not just speak idly!”3 He speaks of His loving attachment to His homeland—and in a prayer that illustrates His native Iran, He writes of its natural landscape with the utmost enthusiasm and captivation:

Passage from a Tablet of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, published in Má’idiy-i-Ásmání, vol. 5, p. 45. Provisional rendering by the present translators.

O sanctified God! From the beginning, Thou didst make the earth of Iran to be fragrant with musk; her soil Thou hast caused to stir all things, yielding forth great knowledge

and gleaming pearls. From her East hath Thy sun ever shed its splendor, and in her
West could the shining moon always be readily discerned. Her land reareth with love,
and her celestially tranquil fields are filled with invigorating flowers and foliage. Her
hills are bedecked with fresh and luscious fruit, and her meadows rouse even the
garden of Paradise to jealousy. Her wisdom stemmeth from her heavenly message and
supernal summons, and she surgeth with the force of a billowing, fathomless ocean.4

Then, using the figurative language of nature, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá speaks of the political and social
landscape of Iran, as well as its worldly affairs and their degeneration. The prayer adopts the
metaphor of nature as its touchstone and standard; the juxtaposition of “the fire of [Iran’s]
knowledge” and “the star of her grandeur,” mentioned in the next sentence, with the splendid
sun in the East of Iran and the visibly shining moon in her West, mentioned in the preceding
lines, seems to depict the inward and outward compatibility and harmony of Iran and
illustrate its glory. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes:

There was a time when the fire of her knowledge was extinguished, and the star of her
grandeur concealed and covered. Her vernal breezes were changed into the winds of
autumn, and her ravishing rose-garden into a thicket of thorns. Her sweet spring
turned brackish; her precious personages were made to wander, cast away to countless
distant lands. Her ray of light was darkened, and her flowing stream straitened. Yet in
time, the ocean of Thy grace surged, and the sun of Thy bounty dawned; the fresh
springtime arrived, and the soul-stirring winds were wafted; the clouds let loose their
copious rain, and the light of that nurturing Sun shone forth. The country was stirred;
the heap of dust was changed into a bed of roses, and soil once barren became the envy
of every garden. The world was made anew, and the fame of Iran spread far and wide.
Her mountainous plains grew lush and verdant, and the birds of the meadows

warbled
their melodies.5

Passage from a prayer of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, published in
Makátíb-i-Hadrat-i-‘Abdu’l-Bahá, vol. 2, p. 82. Provisional
rendering by the present translators.
ibid., pp. 82–83. Provisional rendering by the present translators.

Through the metaphor of nature, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá speaks of changes unfolding in Iran and its
evident decline, along with spiritual developments and occurrences that, through the grace
and bounty of God, have taken place and are still at work in the country’s core. This is a
spiritual power which, in His view, is a breed apart from any other historical, political, or
social awarenesses that might have gradually come about, and which are necessarily
restricted by their own confining circumstances and attending limitations. This power is a
source of real influence. It is not a reaction to political defeats; rather, its purpose is to
manifest, in the atmosphere of Iran, the concealed “star of her grandeur.” It is a spiritual
power that has emerged in lockstep with nature. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s language about nature here
is so interwoven with His language about this spiritual power that it is difficult, at first, to tell
them apart in what He is saying. He employs a style of expression which indicates that they
both share a single source—that both the natural landscape of Iran and this spiritual power, a
gift from God, are derived from the same Origin—and also demonstrates that this spiritual
power, like nature itself, grows naturally and automatically, and that it cannot be resisted. It
cannot be reduced to mere awareness; rather, it is the “subject”6 of awareness itself. It is not
just expressing new meaning; rather, it is breathing “a new breath of inner significance”7 into
the lifeless bodies of the spiritual conditions of Iran and the world at large. Hence, it is a life-
giving breath, a different breath—different from what contemporary Iranians modeling the
West (probably much to their humiliation!) speak of and write books and disquisitions about,
seeking the path to their salvation in it. That potency, that potentiality, consists of world-

embracing ideas, this forgotten capital of all Iranian intellectuals, first expressed in the mold of the Persian language, and later expounded by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in His travels to the West.8 In other words, these ideas have taken on a modern form—and in spite of this, Iranian intellectuals vie with one another in ignoring it.

These ideas have been formulated and neatly arranged in the manner of current disciplines; they are readily accessible even to any adolescent student, and are yet met with unmitigated disregard by the most erudite Iranians. At any rate, this spiritual power transcends the concept of awareness. It is a being, a spark that first flashed across the inner reality of Iran, prompting a humanitarian movement in which only a few of its peoples [the Bahá’ís], who have been treated most unkindly, have participated until now. It is with reference to that spark that ‘Abdu’l-Bahá writes, in the above quote, of the illumination of that “inner Iran”:

“A being that undergoes personal conscious or unconscious experience of itself and of the world” (The American Heritage Dictionary).
The original phrase, rúh-i-jadíd-i-ma‘ání, is a direct quote from a passage published in Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá’u’lláh, no. XLIII, where it has been translated less literally by Shoghi Effendi as “a fresh potency.” The phrase “lifeless bodies” (kálbud-i-afsurdih), which occurs immediately afterwards in this sentence of the essay, is a paraphrase of ajsád-i-alfáz (literally, “the bodies of words”) from that same passage in Gleanings, where Shoghi Effendi appears to have rendered it into two separate phrases: “every human frame” and “every word.”
Author’s note: And thus, the path to reaching the source itself—the source of awareness of it, in its pure form—will always be in Persian.

. . . the fresh springtime arrived, and the soul-stirring winds were wafted; the clouds let loose their copious rain, and the light of that nurturing Sun shone forth. The country was stirred; the heap of dust was changed into a bed of roses, and soil once barren became the envy of every garden. The world was made anew, and the fame

of
Iran spread far and wide. Her mountainous plains grew lush and verdant, and the birds
of the meadows warbled their melodies."9

This refers to the "inner Iran" and the enhancement of its capacity and potential—latent, yet
apparent to the eyes of its discerning denizens. Otherwise, its plains and foothills were the
same as they had always been. The outer natural landscape of Iran and its climate had not
changed. In reality, ʻAbdu'l-Bahá was writing of the inner landscape of Iran using the language
of its outer landscape. With the paintbrush of natural features, He depicts the inner nature of
Iran, unprecedented and newly founded. It is none other than this "inner Iran" that will
ultimately influence its outer being. The Iran of the future is inextricably bound with this
"inner Iran," its actualized capacity and power to effloresce, and in the end it is in that outer
mirror that such inner actuality will be brilliantly reflected. What is of absolute importance is
the spiritual event unfolding in the inner reality of Iran. ʻAbdu'l-Bahá's is a description of that
inner reality, an aspect of Iran hidden within itself, yet an Iran still neglected, and at the same
time the future Iran that must be built.

This, indeed, is how ʻAbdu'l-Bahá described His Iran with His own pen. Notwithstanding that,
apart from His earliest years, He spent all His life in exile and later in Ottoman lands (Turkey
and present-day Israel), and although Turkey has beautiful nature of its own, ʻAbdu'l-Bahá
never wrote anything like this about that place. In His letters and Writings, He refers to
Himself in one sense as "this vagrant" in relation to this Iran, along with its "musk-laden
earth" and "celestially tranquil fields"—a Vagrant Who writes and speaks Persian most
eloquently, and Who in fact always carried that language, a treasured part of His homeland,
with Him, taking it with Him to the most far-flung places. Yet only one who has fixed one's
heart on Iran can feel displaced from it—and this is an unusual attachment of the heart. It was
only as a boy of seven that ʻAbdu'l-Bahá ceased to have a life in His

homeland and faced the cruelest injustices. His Father was consigned to the Síyáh-Chál of Násiri'd-Dín Sháh, and He Himself suffered intense hardship in order to secure the bare necessities of life. Eventually, at the age of eight, He was forcibly driven out of His homeland, accompanied by His family and a number of other Bábís, through the snow-covered mountain passes of Asadábád in Hamadán—this under escort during an unbearably cold winter without the proper overcoats to provide sufficient warmth.

'Abdu'l-Bahá, Makátíb, vol. 2, pp. 82–83. Provisional rendering by the present translators.

Had it been anyone else subjected to such blatant oppression, they would not even mention the name of Iran, let alone cherish a lifelong love of Iran in their heart. This was Someone Who, as He traveled in America sixty years later, spoke with His friends about His love of Iran, bitterly lamenting the ruin into which it had fallen and the sorry state into which its people had sunk, and Who, during that same journey in America, and through His presence at scientific, cultural, and religious gatherings and addresses at centers of scholarly learning, as well as churches and synagogues, gained a reputation as "a Persian" wishing to elevate the name of Iran; bring about "the establishment of ancient glory for Iran and Iranians in the countries and provinces of Europe and America";10 and instill a firmly-rooted love of Iran in the hearts of the Bahá'ís of the world, first and foremost in His own family, such that His own grandson, Shoghi Effendi, who had never visited Iran, should have had as his greatest desire—which was in fact the desire of his grandfather, 'Abdu'l-Bahá—not only to see Iran, but to make pilgrimage to it as a holy land, as he himself wrote:

My highest aspiration, my heart's most ardent desire, is to make pilgrimage to that repository of light . . . to have the honor of treading the radiant soil, and traversing the hallowed valleys, mountains, and hills of that most exalted clime; to inhale the sweet

savors of holiness wafting from that land; and to drink the living waters from the rivers
that flow in those regions.11

This is an indelible attachment to one's fatherland, formed at a distance from it, without
having ever been in it. It is a tale that tells of that attachment, formed in its framework, which
one harbors in one's soul, rejoicing at the very thought of it. This is not about just any land; it
is a most exalted land, a piece of heaven. It is, as 'Abdu'l-Bahá has mentioned, a "collective
center," an all-unifying agency, that gathers people around itself, even as a spirit, which is the
all-unifying agency of the human body. And since, as we have discussed, one's homeland is
"the place where our presence and absence intersect . . . [containing] the two within itself"—
and because it binds us, with the passage of time, to its wide expanse—it thus connects its
people to one another, near and far alike. 'Abdu'l-Bahá refers to this matter in the following
way:

Passage from a Tablet of 'Abdu'l-Bahá published in Muntakhabátí az Makátíb-i-Hadrat-i-'Abdu'l-Bahá, vol. 6, p.
58 (selection no. 80). Provisional rendering by the present translators.
Passage from a letter of Shoghi Effendi, published in Tawqí' át-i-Mubárakih (1922–1926), p. 72. Provisional
rendering by the present translators.

. . . patriotism is a collective center; nationalism is a collective center . . . political
alliance is a collective center; the union of ideals is a collective center, and the
prosperity of the world of humanity is dependent upon the organization and promotion of the collective centers.12

"The prosperity of the world of humanity" thus consists in our attempt to utilize the all-
unifying agency, as well as our best efforts to extend the sphere of its influence.

It must not be forgotten, however, that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's loving attachment to His homeland of
Iran is, in His view, a particular matter, not a universal one. Hence, it cannot contain any
element contradictory to that which is universal and pertains to all humanity. Patriotism must

not lead to nationalistic prejudices, which lay the foundation for war. There is always the possibility of conflict between the particular and the universal. It was, therefore, in consideration of this danger that, in His Western travels, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá argued against this sort of [particularistic] element. In a talk given before two hundred people in Paris on 21 October 1911, delivered close before World War I and precisely because of the existence of these very prejudices still justified by the people of today, He says:

We wish for love among humanity to come about. Love requires connections. In one case, connections may be familial; in another, the means of love may be national connections; and in yet another, the means of love may consist in a single language . . . all these means are particular. Universal love will not come about [through them].
Love among the inhabitants of the same country may be effected, but the denizens of other nations will be deprived thereof . . . These connections will not result in universal love . . . inasmuch as those connections are material, and material connections are limited.13

A national bond is, in itself, imperfect and incomplete. Without being abandoned, it must be expanded and augmented. The principle here is to proceed from the limited to the unlimited.
In order to protect and maintain the limited, we must connect with the unlimited. A love of one’s country must be joined to a love of the world, so that both the country and the interests of the country persist. National interests should be thought of in a universal mindset. This is the argument on which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s solution is based. According to His special usage of the word “matter,” which is only distantly related to the word “materialism,” it can be said that whatever is limited is material—but our opportunities are not solely confined to material ones. To limit someone to their physical or material dimension and that which results from it

‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Tablets of the Divine Plan, no. 14 (“Tablet to the

Bahá'ís of the United States and Canada," dated 8 March 1917): http://www.bahai.org/r/328609053

Passage from a talk given by 'Abdu'l-Bahá at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Scott, published in Khitábát-i-Hadrat-i-'Abdu'l-Bahá, vol. 1, p. 65. Provisional rendering by the present translators.

is to impose the greatest restriction on them in the way of their ability to solve their own problems, in that it takes away from them both openness and open-mindedness. In spirituality, we have an opportunity forgotten by the people of today. We, therefore, using all the spiritual and material means at our disposal, must expand, with every passing day, the sphere of our philanthropy.14 Continuing His talk, 'Abdu'l-Bahá explains how—namely, by what means—we can access the spiritual reserves that lie latent within us:

The greatest means for the unification of humanity is spiritual power, for it is not limited by any constraint. It is religion that can bring about the unity of all who dwell on earth. It is the act of turning to God that conduces to the oneness of the world. What is meant by "religion," however, is not the blind imitations that prevail among mankind today. These are the cause of enmity and hatred; they lead to war and strife.15

Indeed, it is these imitations that caused the appearance of ISIS and the recurrence of the Crusades. Nowadays, people dread such tendencies as these. The very fact that Americans and Europeans took to the streets a few years ago to protest the ban against Iranians and the citizens of some other countries from traveling to America transcended personal interests, and even Islam and Christianity, and thus rose above divisive "blind imitations." This is a transcending of borders and a demonstration of the potential for patriotism to be transformed from a particular matter into a universal one. It is the expansion of the concept of a homeland into a positive sense, one that has caused nations in this part of the world and that to reach each other, unaffected by the conflicts of their governments.

Hence, given that He was Iranian, 'Abdu'l-Bahá loved the land of Iran and its peoples, its

languages and its religions, with a love underlying an indelible connection to them, but this connection was compatible with ideals that are universal and applicable to all humanity as such. Yet ‘Abdu’l-Bahá went beyond that. When He began His travels to the West, He presented Himself as an Iranian who belonged to the entire human race. This is reflected in everything He discussed, giving a universal dimension to His message—a quality never evinced by any other Iranian before Him—and it is for this very reason that no Iranian could have had as much ability as ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to speak to Westerners and captivate their minds. The unique effect He had stemmed from the extent of His love. His way of being Iranian and His love for His homeland represent a “universal patriotism,” presentable in today’s progressive discourse of human rights.

“Philanthropy” in its literal sense, “love of humankind in general” (The American Heritage Dictionary), as a translation of the author’s use of insán-dústí here.
‘Abdu’l-Bahá, Khitábát, vol. 1, p. 66. Provisional rendering by the present translators.

This issue may be better understood with the help of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s own explanation of Iran and its relationship to the message of the Bahá’í Faith, where He says: “Spiritual power hath gushed out of Iran. This is a sure decree, ‘a promise that will not prove untrue.’”16 The wellspring of this power, and the place of its initial appearance, is Iran. At present, this spiritual power introduces Iran in a way that makes an especially favorable impression on the whole world. ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Iran is a distinctly different one, a peace-seeking Iran that takes on a connection with the world—a connection by virtue of its being the wellspring of that “spiritual power”—through which Iran becomes a part of the world that looks out onto the rest of the planet, a part that is present in the earth’s entirety and linked to it, without denying and renouncing that “parthood.”

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s Iran represents a love of that country, a part of the globe that has acquired a

universal belonging to the whole world. It is a particular love that has become universal, and
it is the sole strategy for eliminating every kind of war and hostility among the nations of the
earth. So long as that strategy becomes a model for nations and governments to follow, it can
lay the foundation for the unity of mankind; that is, lasting peace. It is with this outlook that
‘Abdu’l-Bahá viewed the world in the talks He gave to audiences from all walks of life while
traveling in the West—an approach that was welcomed by all those who heard it.

Passage from a Tablet of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, published in Makátíb, vol. 2, p. 260, and provisionally rendered by the
present translators. The quotation in the second sentence comes from Qur’án 11:65.

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