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'By the express invitation' of Midhat Pasha: 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to Beirut

By Necati Alkan

This small section of a groundbreaking research article by Necati Alkan entitled "entitled Midhat Pasha and 'Abdu'l-Bahá in 'Akká: The Historical Background of the Tablet of the Land of Bá " provides light into a little-known chapter in 'Abdu'l-Bahá's life, His travels to Beirut (referred to as "the Land of Bá" by Bahá'u'lláh in his extraordinarily moving Tablet, the Lawḥ-i-Arḍ-i-Bá or Tablet of the Land of Bá (Beirut). This excerpt is reprinted with permission from the Author. The full article is accessible by clicking on the link below:

**[MIDHAT PASHA AND 'Abdu'l-Bahá IN 'AKKÁ:
THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE TABLET OF THE LAND OF BÁ](#)**

Abstract

In *God Passes By*, Shoghi Effendi mentions various distinguished political and other figures who met 'Abdu'l-Bahá. Among them were several Ottoman officials who were friendly towards Baha'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. One of them was the outstanding liberal Ottoman statesman Midhat Pasha, who, as the governor general (vâli) of Ottoman Syria, invited 'Abdu'l-Bahá ('Abbas Effendi) to Beirut. To date, there have been only very few references to this meeting between these two figures. On the occasion of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to Beirut, Baha'u'lláh revealed the Lawḥ-i-Arḍ-i Bá, the Tablet of the Land of Bá (Beirut), in honour of his son. Hitherto, the circumstances and exact date of this remained unclear.

The object of this paper is to present the background of this episode in Bahá'í history in the light of a manuscript by the eminent Bahá'í Haji Mirza Haydar 'Ali Isfahani that has surfaced recently. His previously unknown account of the visit of Midhat Pasha to 'Akká, during which Midhat Pasha met 'Abdu'l-Bahá prior to the latter's visit to Beirut, provides new information on the circumstances surrounding the revelation of the Tablet of the Land of Bá. With the help of other sources we are also able to determine when this episode took place. Before this discussion, the life and activities of Midhat Pasha are briefly outlined. An annotated translation of Mirza Haydar 'Ali's account is appended to this article.

'By the express invitation' of Midhat Pasha: 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to Beirut

Bahá'í sources stress the importance of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to Beirut, during the course of which he met not only Midhat Pasha but also other notables. According to Shoghi Effendi, it was through 'Abdu'l-Bahá's widespread influence that the Bahá'í Faith gained respect among a wide circle of officials and intellectuals in the Middle East: 'It was through the extraordinarily warm reception accorded Him during His visit to Beirut, through His contact with Midhat Pasha, a former Grand Vizir of Turkey [sic], ... and through His constant association with officials, notables and leading ecclesiastics who, in increasing number had besought His presence, during the final years of His Father's ministry, that He had succeeded in raising the prestige of the Cause He had championed to a level it had never previously attained.'¹³ The significance of this 'historic journey, unparalleled in the religious annals of mankind',¹⁴ from the Bahá'í viewpoint, is that Midhat Pasha invited 'Abdu'l-Bahá at a time when the latter was a prisoner of the Ottomans, and the official edict of Sultan Abdülaziz ordering the exile of Bahá'u'lláh and his followers and their strict confinement in 'Akká was still valid.¹⁵ In honour of 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to Beirut, Bahá'u'lláh revealed the Lawḥ-i Arḍ-i Bá, or the Tablet of the Land of Bá (Beirut).¹⁶ Here, as in several other writings, Bahá'u'lláh extols the station of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, whom he calls the 'Most Mighty Branch of God'. In the words of Shoghi Effendi, this tablet was 'a communication which He dictated to His amanuensis' as 'a glowing tribute, glorifying Him as the One "round Whom all names revolve," as "the Most Mighty Branch of God," and as "His ancient and immutable Mystery."¹⁷ Shoghi Effendi provides the date for neither the visit nor this eulogy. Speaking about the house of 'Udi Khammar, to which Bahá'u'lláh and his family had moved in 1873, he states that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to Beirut, at the

¹³ *God Passes By* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1979 second printing) 242.

¹⁴ Balyuzi, *Bahá'u'lláh* 378.

¹⁵ The edict is in the Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (Ottoman Archives) in Istanbul, Turkey, *Iraderler/Meclis-i Mahsus* 1475-1, dated 20 Rabi' al-awwal 1285/12 July 1868.

¹⁶ The Arabic original is published in *Majmú'ih-'í az Alwáh-i Jamál-i Aqdas-i Abhá kih ba'd az Kitáb-i Aqdas Nizil Shudih* (Langenhain: Bahá'í-Verlag, 137 B.E./1980) 138; English trans. in *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1988) 227-28.

¹⁷ *God Passes By* 243; the amanuensis was Mirza Aqa Jan (see below).

invitation of Midhat Pasha, occurred about that time.¹⁸ However, the source of the material regarding 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to Beirut is not provided here, nor is it in subsequent references¹⁹ nor does Midhat Pasha mention this in his memoirs.²⁰

The Bahá'í historian Hasan Balyuzi offers different dates for 'Abdu'l-Bahá's Beirut visit. In his work 'Abdu'l-Bahá, he says that 'Abdu'l-Bahá travelled to Beirut 'by the express invitation of one of the most brilliant statesmen of the Ottoman Empire – Midhat Pasha, the liberal reformer, who as grand vizier was instrumental in inducing the Sultan to grant a constitution to his people'.²¹ He adds that this 'must have taken place sometime in 1878, and on this occasion Bahá'u'lláh revealed a Tablet [Lawḥ-i-Arḍ-i-Bá] to commemorate and mark its significance'.²² However, given the fact that Midhat Pasha arrived in Syria as the vâli at the end of November 1878, it is not likely that 'Abdu'l-Bahá visited him right at the beginning of his governorship and 'sometime in 1878' could apply only to December that year.

Balyuzi then says, in the first edition of his book Bahá'u'lláh: The King of Glory (1980), 'Sometime in 1879, 'Abdu'l-Bahá travelled to Beirut',²³ but in the revised edition of this book (1991) the date of the visit has been changed to 'In June 1880'.²⁴ The question arose as to why this change was made without an explanation. At this point our attention turned to possible records outside Bahá'í sources. Newspapers generally mention arrivals and departures of notables anywhere, as did newspapers in the Middle East. It seemed plausible that 'Abdu'l-Bahá's visit to Beirut was announced by a newspaper, since he was well known and respected not only in the Ottoman Empire. In fact, the Arabic Beirut-based weekly *Thamarát al-Funún* announced 'Abdu'l-Bahá's arrival on 8 June 1880 with these words:

¹⁸ Ibid 193.

¹⁹ Both Shoghi Effendi and Hasan Balyuzi may have the information from Husayn 'Avarih' Ayati, al-Kawikib ad-Durriyya, (Cairo: Matba'at as-Sa'ida, 1924, see <http://www.h-net.org/~bahai/areprint/vol4/kd2/kd2.htm>, viewed 15 November 2004) 2:17. This is discussed below.

²⁰ Midhat Pasha, *Tabsira-i Ibret and Mir'ât-ı Hayret* (2 vols. in one, Istanbul 1325/1906–07). In modern Turkish: Osman Selim Kocahanoğlu (ed.): *Midhat Paşa'nın Hatıraları: Hayatım İbret Olsun and Yıldız Mahkemesi ve Taif Zindanı* (Temel: Istanbul 2003). Moreover no reference to this is made by his son Ali Haydar Midhat in *The life of Midhat Pasha: a record of his services, political reforms, banishment, and judicial murder derived from private documents and reminiscences by his son Ali Haydar Midhat Bey* (London: John Murray, 1903); idem *Midhat-Pacha: sa vie - son oeuvre* (Paris: Stock, 1908). Ali Haydar may have omitted Bahá'í references.

²¹ Hasan M. Balyuzi, 'Abdu'l-Bahá (George Ronald: London 1971) 37–38.

²² Ibid 38.

²³ Balyuzi, Bahá'u'lláh 378.

²⁴ Ibid.

'His Excellency, the learned, erudite, intelligent and illustrious 'Abbas Effendi, resident of the city of 'Akká, has arrived in our city. The purpose of his arrival is change of air, may God prolong his well- being.'²⁵

In line with this, 'Abdu'l-Bahá must have arrived in Beirut around that date. Yet no reference with regard to 'Abdu'l-Bahá's departure could be found.²⁶

The 'mystery' of the Beirut visit was solved after elucidation by the publisher of Balyuzi's book and the Bahá'í World Centre. According to the publisher, a letter of 'Abdu'l-Bahá was found in the Bahá'í World Centre Archives in Haifa, dated a week after his return from Beirut, in which he states that he was in Beirut between 1 and 17 June 1880. The publisher also states that Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of the Land of Bá was written on 9 June 1880, a week or so after his departure. This was all recorded in a list and this is why 'In June of 1880' replaced 'Sometime in 1879' in the revised 1991 edition of the book.²⁷ However, in a memorandum of the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice concerning this matter, which was forwarded to the present author, it is stated that in 'the Tablet of 'Abdu'l-Bahá in question' which 'is dated 10 Rajab 1297 (19 June 1880)',²⁸ he 'alludes to His visit to Beirut, but He does not provide specific dates'. A provisional translation of the relevant passage is presented as follows:

... and this servant has, as a thing divinely ordained, been unwell for some time past, until I went to Beirut for a change of air. I have recently come back from there and at present I am staying at the village of Yarká which lies on a hill some 18 kilometres from 'Akká, and I intend to remain here for a while.

Praise be to God, the Lord of mankind, that the illness is now remedied, though a state of infirmity still persists. Moreover, I am overshadowed by the bounties of God from every side.²⁹

²⁵ *Thamarát al-Funún*, 29 Jumida ath-tháni 1297/8 June 1880 (Tuesday), p. 1.

قدم الى بلدنا جناب العالم الفاضل الذكي الماجد عباس افندي نزيل مدينة عكا و قدومه بقصد
تبدیل الهواء اناله الله الصحة

²⁶ This is because of the illegibility of many issues of this newspaper at the Library of the University of Haifa. My thanks to Prof. Butrus Abu-Manneh for bringing this newspaper to my attention and to Dr. Fruma Zachs for providing access to the newspaper *al-Janna* (though no mention of 'Abbas Effendi could be found here).

²⁷ E-mail of Erica Leith (George Ronald Books) to Moojan Momen, dated 19 August 2004, forwarded to Necati Alkan on the same date. According to the e-mail the information that formed the basis for this change came from Mr Abdullah Mesbah, a former member of the Research Department at the Bahá'í World Centre.

²⁸ This corresponds actually to 18 June 1880.

²⁹ Research Department Memorandum dated 9 December 2004.

Moreover, it is pointed out in the memorandum that 'in a copy of this Tablet in the handwriting of Mirza Aqa Jan, held in the World Centre archives, the date 1 Rajab 1297 appears, corresponding to 9 June 1880 in the Gregorian calendar'.³⁰

Having fixed the approximate date of the visit and the actual day of the revelation of Bahá'u'lláh's Lawḥ-i-Arḍ-i-Bá, we may well ask about the circumstances, since Hasan Balyuzi states that 'Abdu'l-Bahá went to Beirut by the 'express invitation' of Midhat Pasha.

³⁰ Ibid.