

# Treatise on Leadership, Risalih-i Siyasiyyih: Treatise on Leadership

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`Abdu'l-Bahá's \*Risalih-i Siyasiyyih\* or Treatise on Leadership (as I think it should be translated) was written in 1891-92 during the Tobacco Revolt in Iran. The Tobacco Revolt, 1890-92, was a popular insurrection against Nasiru'd-Din Shah for his having granted a monopoly on the marketing of Iranian tobacco to a British carpetbagger. It was among the first truly national protest movements, uniting merchants, money lenders, tobacco farmers and the Shi`ite religious leadership in opposition to this give-away of Iranian resources.

The Treatise was published in Bombay in 1892 and was the first policy statement of `Abdu'l-Bahá upon taking the reins of the leadership of the Bahá'í community. It shows his alarm at the increasing involvement of religious leaders and communities in this populist movement against the civil Iranian state, and cites the way past such religious populist movements have led to foreign intervention or increased absolutism (i.e. the `Urabi Revolt in Egypt and the 1876 Constitutional Revolution in Istanbul). `Abdu'l-Bahá argues forcefully for a separation of religion and state as a basis for Bahá'í non-involvement in such anti-state violence.

I myself see the Treatise as, in many ways, a reversal of the stances adopted by Bahá'u'lláh in his 1891 Tablet to the World (also a response to the Tobacco Revolt), which denounced Qajar tyranny and severely counselled the Shah that only calling a parliament on the British model could hope to save him from such popular turmoil, which was provoked by his high-handed authoritarian approach to rule. `Abdu'l-Bahá, on the contrary, seems to have had (provisionally) a more Prussian than a British model of ideal governance in mind (as did many Ottoman thinkers of the 1890s), and for him strengthening the civil state against the encroachments of groups like the radical clergy took precedence over any democratic imperative, for the time being. Decisive was his view that democratic movements in the Middle East of the time tended to weaken the indigenous state so fatally that they opened the way to European colonization--something he was desperate to see Iran avoid. It appears to me that this shift to the Right in `Abdu'l-Bahá's thinking resulted from the disappointments in Istanbul and Egypt of 1878-1882. (A movement for parliamentary democracy in Egypt 1878-1882 had led to turmoil and finally to British invasion and occupation). `Abdu'l-Bahá indirectly refers to these events in the Treatise.

