

# Research Note

Baha'i Studies Review, Volume 14 © Intellect Ltd 2008  
 Research Note. English language. doi: 10.1386/bsr.14.109/7

## The Global Distribution of Baha'is in the 1920s

Peter Smith

### Abstract

*Unfortunately, our knowledge of basic Baha'i demographics during the 1920s is still very poor. This note summarizes the information presently available, and may serve to encourage further and much-needed research on the topic.*

### 1. Global distribution

With the introduction of the *Bahā'ī Year Book/Bahā'ī World* series from 1925–6 onwards, we have for the first time a global set of publicly available official Baha'i statistics and it becomes possible to gain a sense of the distribution of the Baha'i Faith worldwide. Thus, by 1925 there was at least a minimal Baha'i presence in 27 countries and colonial territories throughout the world. In the Middle East, there were Baha'is in Iran, Turkey and the mandated territories of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Palestine; in North Africa, in Egypt and Tunis; in sub-Saharan Africa, in South Africa; in the rest of Asia, in India, Burma, China and Japan; in the Pacific, in Australia, New Zealand and Hawaii (then an overseas American territory); in the Americas, in Brazil, Canada and the United States; in Europe, in Austria, France, Germany, Great Britain, Italy, Sweden and Switzerland. There were also Baha'is in the newly established Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, in the Caucasus, Turkestan and European Russia.<sup>1</sup> This was not a period of dramatic Baha'i expansion, but by 1930 there were Baha'is in an additional 15 territories (making a total of 42): Transjordan (modern Jordan); South West Africa (modern Namibia); [Southern] Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe); the Dutch East Indies (now Indonesia); the Philippines; Hong Kong; French Polynesia (Tahiti); Fiji; Denmark; the Netherlands; Hungary; the Irish Free State (Ireland); Norway; Poland; and Yugoslavia. A Baha'i group in Korea emerged briefly, in 1928, but by 1930 it was no longer recorded.

Of course, these various Baha'i 'presences' varied greatly in their size and nature, from Iran, with a very large Baha'i community of many tens of thousands which traced its origins back to its Babi forebears of the 1840s, to the small but well-organized and dynamic community of North America and a sprinkling of newly arrived or newly converted individuals in such places as Tahiti, Norway and Rhodesia. Some presences were somewhat insubstantial: one address in Italy (of an American expatriate) is noted as 'In summer only'.<sup>2</sup>

### Keywords

Baha'i statistics  
 1920s  
 institutional growth  
 population figures  
 administration  
 Iran  
 USA

1. If these three areas are counted as separate territories (as in the *Bahā'ī World* series), then the total number of countries and territories in 1925 would be raised to 29.
2. BW 2:185. The abbreviation 'BW' is used hereinafter for the successive volumes of *The Bahā'ī World* (vols. 2–12, 1928–54. Rpt. Wilmette IL: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1980–81). 'BYB' represents *The Bahā'ī Year Book*, vol. 1 (for 1925–6).

3. The available figures vary in what they provide. Those for 1925 (calculated from BYB 1:101–3) comprise a list of ‘Leading Local Baha’i Centers’ (a few of them specifically marked as [local] spiritual assemblies); ‘Local Baha’i Assemblies’ in North America; ‘Baha’i Groups’ in North America; and ‘Foreign Baha’i Centers’. The 1928 figures (BW 2: 182–90) list [local] spiritual assemblies – with names and addresses of secretaries corrected to 30 April 1928; ‘Baha’i groups’ (one list with contact addresses and another without); and ‘Baha’i Administrative Divisions in Persia’. The figures for 1930 (BW 3:217–27) provide lists of local assemblies (with secretaries’ addresses as of 30 April 1930); ‘Baha’i [local] Assemblies and Groups’ (a few with addresses, and with some inconsistencies, including the exclusion of North American local assemblies); ‘Young People’s Baha’i Groups’; and the Iranian administrative divisions. All three directories also list national spiritual assemblies.

An indication of these differences can be derived from a consideration of the figures for Baha’i ‘centres’, ‘groups’ and local spiritual assemblies, which can be calculated from *The Bahā’i World* volumes for the Baha’i population outside of Iran. None of these conceptualizations is without problems as a measure of Baha’i distribution, especially during the 1920s, when the modern system of local assemblies was just being established and different systems of organization were in use in various parts of the Baha’i world. In modern Baha’i usage, which originated in the 1920s, a centre or ‘locality’ can refer to any place (city, town, village, hamlet, rural or urban district) in which there is at least one Baha’i; a group represents at least two Baha’is in a specific place but not yet an organized assembly; and a local assembly is a nine-member elected council representing a particular local Baha’i community. Centres or localities therefore provide us with the most inclusive measure of the Baha’i presence in a country or territory, while the establishment of local assemblies indicates organized bodies of local Baha’is. These measures do not give us a clear indication of Baha’i numbers – a local spiritual assembly might represent a community of only nine adult Baha’is (the bare minimum for its existence) or one comprising several thousands of families. Nor do they provide us with a uniform measure of distribution: localities have been defined differently over time and from one country to another (does the presence of a Baha’i in a neighbouring village or suburb constitute a separate locality, or does he/she belong to a nearby group or assembly? Should a large city be subdivided into separate sub-communities etc.?). Nevertheless, the available data (Table 1) does allow us to make a number of broad-brush comments on the distribution of Baha’is around the world.<sup>3</sup>

Region	Local spiritual assemblies (LSAs)			Total listed localities <sup>1</sup>		
	1925	1928	1930	1925	1928	1930
Iran	U	17 <sup>2</sup>	17 <sup>2</sup>	28 <sup>3</sup>	346	473
Rest of Islamic heartland	U	5	5	34 <sup>3</sup>	66	68
North America	43	49	47	69	69	74
Europe	U	12 <sup>4</sup>	11	39 <sup>3</sup>	60	75
Rest of the world	U	19	20	20 <sup>3</sup>	32	41
Totals	U	102	100	190	573	731
Totals excluding Iran	U	85	83	162	227	258

Table 1: Local spiritual assemblies and localities by region, 1925–30.

Source: Calculated from BYB 1:101–3; BW 2:182–90; 3:217–27.

Key: U = Data unavailable or incomplete.

Notes: 1. LSAs and recognized groups unless otherwise stated.

2. LSA figures for Iran are for divisional centres.

3. ‘Baha’i Centres’.

4. Five German LSAs assumed (as per 1930). Original data undifferentiated.

As to Iran, it should be noted that comparable statistics do not exist during this period, the figures available being for the 17 Baha'i 'administrative divisions' into which the country was divided in 1927, each with its own listed towns and villages. To produce global figures, I have counted each of these divisions as a local assembly and each of the listed towns and villages as a locality, but I am obviously forcing the data in doing so. Note also, that I have included the 1925 figures, even though presuming that they massively under-report the number of Baha'i localities in Iran (with only 28 centres listed for 1925, whereas figures for 1928 and subsequent years list many hundreds).

It should also be noted that there are likely to be qualitative differences between the figures for North America and some parts of the rest of the world, reflecting the more rapid development of modern Baha'i administration in North America. Thus, while the American and Canadian figures for assemblies and groups can be presumed to be exact, some of the rest are more uncertain, with European 'groups', for example, including a number of localities in which only a single Baha'i was resident, and the British figures for 1925 and 1928 excluding everyone who was not in a local assembly area. Everywhere, the figures for local spiritual assemblies are likely to be accurate, as these bodies were required to be formally established and re-formed or re-elected on an annual basis. In summary, the information available is as follows:

	1925	1928	1930
North America	LSAs and groups	LSAs and groups	LSAs and groups
Iran	Centres	Administrative divisions	Administrative divisions
Rest of world	Centres	LSAs, groups and at least some isolated Baha'is	LSAs, groups and at least some isolated Baha'is

Pooling this information from three volumes of the *Bahā'ī Year Book/Bahā'ī World* series results in Table 1.

In terms of localities, Iran clearly dominated in the two years for which full data is available (1928, 1930), with 473 localities by 1930, and approaching two-thirds of the world total for both years (60%, 65%). Meanwhile, the number of localities in which Baha'is resided in the rest of the world rose from 162 (1925) to 227 (1928) and then 258 (1930), a 14% increase for the 1928–30 period, when the figures are more reliable. Of the areas outside Iran, the main concentrations were in the remainder of the Faith's 'Islamic heartland' (the Middle East, North Africa and Soviet Asia), North America and Europe, each with more than a quarter of the non-Iranian localities (26%, 29% and 29% respectively in 1930). The whole of the rest of the world (sub-Saharan Africa, the Indian subcontinent, East and South-East Asia, Australasia and Latin America) was relatively insignificant, together accounting for only 12% of the total in 1925, rising to 14% in 1928 and 16% in 1930.

Reliable local assembly figures for 1925, outside of North America, are not available; but the 1928 and 1930 figures outside of Iran may be assumed to be accurate. It is noteworthy that the figures for both years are almost the same (global totals of 102 and 100, and non-Iranian totals of 85 and 83), indicating that the newly established administration had stabilized. Note also that

the local assemblies in North America (the area of greatest administrative strength) constituted almost half the world total for both years. As already noted, the low figures for Iran may be misleading: the Iranian Baha'is adopted a system of administrative regions ('divisions') in 1927, and it is these figures which are given – no separate 'local assembly' figures being available.

## 2. The 'Islamic heartland'

The Baha'i Faith initially emerged and developed in Iran and the Ottoman Empire, which, together with the former Imperial Russian provinces in the Caucasus and Central Asia, I have termed the religion's 'Islamic heartland'. The region's predominance in the global figures for localities has already been noted and reflects its historical status. Differences between countries/territories within this area were considerable, as is indicated in Table 2.

Country	Local spiritual assemblies (LSAs)			Total listed localities <sup>1</sup>		
	1925	1928	1930	1925	1928	1930
Iran (Persia)	U	17 <sup>2</sup>	17 <sup>2</sup>	28	346	473
Turkey	1	1	1	2	3	9
ARAB WORLD						
Iraq (Mesopotamia)	–	0	0	4	7	8
Syria (and Lebanon) <sup>3</sup>	2	2	2	4	7	4
Palestine (and Transjordan)	1	1	1	2	4	8 <sup>4</sup>
Egypt	U	1	1	5	10	4
Tunis	–	0	0	1	1	1
<i>Sub-totals</i>	[3]	4	4	16	29	25
SOVIET ASIA						
Caucasus	–	0	0	11	17	17
Turkestan	–	0	0	0	17	17
<i>Sub-totals</i>	–	0	0	16	34	34
TOTALS	[4]	22	22	62	412	541
Totals excluding Iran	[4]	5	5	34	66	68

Table 2: Local spiritual assemblies and localities in 'Islamic heartland', 1925–30.

Source: Calculated from BYB 1:101–3; BW 2:182–90; 3:217–27.

Key: U = Unavailable or incomplete.

- Notes: 1. Baha'i centres' in 1925. LSAs and recognized groups in 1928 and 1930, excluding Iran.  
 2. LSA figures for Iran are for divisional centres.  
 3. Beirut (Lebanon) is listed under Syria (both territories were part of the French mandate).  
 4. Adasiyyih (Transjordan) is listed under Palestine (both territories were part of the British mandate).

Clearly, Iran – with some 473 listed localities by 1930 – was in a category of its own, and represented the dominant concentration of Baha'is in the region (87% of the total of 541 localities), but the rest of the region had a significant share of the non-Iranian localities worldwide (26% in 1930). Very few local spiritual assemblies were formed, however, with only five listed in the Middle East outside of Iran during this period (Alexandretta, Beirut, Haifa, Istanbul and Port Said). The developing persecution of all forms of religion in the Soviet Union created problems for the Baha'is in the Caucasus and Turkestan, as is reflected by the absence of local assemblies in the two areas.

It should be noted that while there were Baha'is living in Iran, Turkey, the Soviet Union and seven Arab territories during the 1920s, there were no Baha'is listed in Afghanistan, the Sudan, Libya (Italian North Africa), Algeria, Morocco, or any part of the Arabian Peninsula.

The Iranian figures present special difficulties. Thus, the 1925 listing gives only 28 'Baha'i centres' for the whole country, a figure that presumably reflects not the total number of localities or local spiritual assemblies, but rather the lack of even basic Baha'i statistics for Iran at that time. This supposition is borne out by the detailed figures provided in 1928 and 1930, both of which utilize a framework of 17 'Baha'i Administrative Divisions', as adopted at the first Iranian Baha'i national convention on 23 May 1927, each with a designated central town and associated towns and villages – with overall totals of 346 (1928) and 473 (1930) respectively (Table 3). Exactly what these administrative centres represented is unclear: it is possible that each had an elected local spiritual assembly to coordinate Baha'i work in the division; but the official listing of local spiritual assemblies outside of Tehran remained meagre, with only five listed in 1928 and 1930 (Hamadān, Kāshān, Kirmān, Mashhad and Sulṭān-Ābād; BW 2:182–3; 3:218).

It will be seen that these administrative divisions vary considerably in their numbers of designated localities, with Khurasan (96), Isfahan (81 by 1930) and Yazd (55 by 1930) between them having almost half the total for the whole country (232 out of 473). The relative sparsity of Baha'i localities in the south of the country is noteworthy. It is not known whether the increases in the total number of localities between 1928 and 1930 was the result of administrative consolidation or of the establishment of Baha'is in new outlying areas. The system of administrative divisions established in 1927 was evidently amended at some point, with the Astarabad division of 1928 being subsequently absorbed into Mazandaran, while a new division for Sistan, in the remote south-east, had come into existence by 1930.

### 3. North America

Outside of Iran, the most important Baha'i community in the world during the 1920s was that of 'North America', i.e. the United States of America and Canada (Table 4). As will be seen, the community was predominantly American, with Canada contributing only a small number of local spiritual assemblies (1 and 2) and total localities (2 and 3). It will be seen that there was some slight growth during the period, with the total number of local assemblies increasing from 43 to 48, while localities increased from 69 to 74.

Division	Centre	1928	1930
<i>North-West</i>		84	103
Azerbaijan (Ādharbāyjān)	Tabrīz	33	37
Qazvīn	Qazvīn	13	18
‘Irāq [Ajāmī]	Sultān-Ābād	12	12
Hamadān	Hamadān	14	22
Kirmānshāhān	Kirmānshāh	12	14
<i>North</i>		51	64
Tehran (Tīhrān)	Tehran	22	23
Gilān	Rasht	8	8
Māzandarān	Sārī	20	33
Astarābād	Bandar-i Jaz	1	[in Māzandarān]
<i>North-East</i>		96	96
Khurāsān	Mashhad	96	96
<i>Central</i>		85	177
Kāshān	Kāshān	11	20
Isfahan (Iṣfāhān)	Isfahan	14	81
Yazd	Yazd	45	55
Kirmān	Kirmān	15	21
<i>South</i>		30	33
Fārs	Shīrāz	20	20
Khuzistān	Ahvāz	6	8
Banādir-i Junūb	Bushire (Būshīhr)	4	4
Sistan	Duzdab	–	1
<b>Totals</b>		<b>346</b>	<b>473</b>

Table 3: *Baha’i administrative divisions and localities in Iran, 1928 and 1930.*

Source: Calculated from BW 2:182–90; 3:217–27.

Note: The division into geographical regions (North-West, North, North-East, Central, South) is my own.

Country	LSAs			Total listed localities <sup>1</sup>		
	1925	1928	1930	1925	1928	1930
Canada	1	2	2	3	2	2
USA	42	47	46	66	67	72
<i>North American totals</i>	43	49	48	69	69	74

*Table 4: Local spiritual assemblies and localities in North America, 1925–30.*

Source: Calculated from BYB 1:101–3; BW 2:182–90; 3:217–27.

Notes: 1. LSAs and recognized groups.

Again, an unusually high proportion of listed localities had established local spiritual assemblies (71% and 64.9% for 1928 and 1930 respectively, compared to global figures, excluding Iran, of 37.4% and 32.2%), indicative of the North American Baha'is' lead in administrative development.

Within each country, there was considerable regional diversity. In Canada, only three provinces had a Baha'i presence (Quebec and British Columbia having local spiritual assemblies and New Brunswick a group [in 1925]). In the United States of America, 22 out of the 48 contiguous states did not have any recorded Baha'i presence during the entire period (Table 5). These were heavily concentrated regionally, with 5 in the Mountain states (Idaho, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah and Wyoming), 3 in the farming states of the Great Plains (Kansas, North and South Dakota), and 13 in the South (Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North and South Carolina, Oklahoma, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia). In other regions, where there were concentrations of Baha'is throughout the period (the Pacific seaboard states, the eastern Midwest, the Northeast), only one state (rural Vermont in New England) had no Baha'i presence. The non-contiguous territory of Alaska also had no Baha'i presence at this time.

#### 4. Europe

During the 1920s there were Baha'is in 15 European countries, including the European part of Russia (Russia itself being a constituent republic of the recently formed Soviet Union). A total of 14 countries had no Baha'i presence at this time – Belgium and Luxembourg; Portugal and Spain; Czechoslovakia; the Baltic states of Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania; Iceland; and in the Balkans, Albania, Bulgaria, Greece and Romania. Nor were there any Baha'is in the several mini-states (Andorra, Liechtenstein, Monaco and San Marino), or the free city of Danzig. There was a marked growth in the overall number of localities over the period – from 39 to 75 (almost double).

Among the countries where there were Baha'is, their distribution was highly uneven (see Table 6), with just over half (38 out of 75) of the localities

Census division and state	LSAs			Total listed localities <sup>1</sup>		
	1925	1928	1930	1925	1928	1930
WEST	11	12	15	14	16	19
<i>Pacific (3)</i>	9	11	14	12	14	16
California	7	8	12	9	11	13
Oregon	1	1	1	1	1	1
Washington	1	2	1	2	2	2
<i>Mountain (8)</i>	2	1	1	2	2	3
Arizona	0	0	1	0	0	1
Colorado	1	1	0	1	1	1
Montana	1	0	0	1	1	1
Idaho, Nevada, New Mexico, Utah, Wyoming	0	0	0	0	0	0
NORTH CENTRAL	14	15	13	23	24	24
<i>West North Central (7)</i>	3	1	1	6	5	5
Iowa	0	0	0	1	1	1
Minnesota	2	1	1	3	3	3
Missouri	1	0	0	1	0	0
Nebraska	0	0	0	1	1	1
Kansas, North Dakota, South Dakota	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>East North Central (5)</i>	11	14	12	17	19	19
Illinois	2	4	4	4	6	5
Indiana	0	0	0	1	0	0
Michigan	3	4	3	4	4	5
Ohio	3	3	2	5	5	5
Wisconsin	3	3	3	3	4	4
NORTHEAST	12	15	14	21	19	21
<i>Middle Atlantic (3)</i>	7	9	9	13	13	14
New Jersey	1	3	3	4	5	5
New York	4	5	4	7	6	7

Table 5: Local spiritual assemblies and localities in the USA, 1925–30.  
(continued)

Table 5 (continued)

Pennsylvania	2	1	2	2	2	2
<i>New England (6)</i>	5	6	5	8	6	7
Connecticut	1	1	1	1	1	1
Maine	1	1	1	1	1	1
Massachusetts	3	3	2	6	3	3
New Hampshire	0	1	1	0	1	1
Rhode Island	0	0	0	0	0	1
Vermont	0	0	0	0	0	0
SOUTH	4	3	3	6	6	6
<i>West South Central (4)</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0
Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, Texas	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>East South Central (4)</i>	0	0	0	0	0	0
Alabama, Kentucky, Mississippi Tennessee	0	0	0	0	0	0
<i>South Atlantic (9)</i>	4	3	3	6	6	6
Florida	1	1	1	2	2	2
Georgia	1	0	0	2	2	2
Maryland	1	1	1	1	1	1
Washington, DC	1	1	1	1	1	1
Delaware, North Carolina, South Carolina, Virginia, West Virginia	0	0	0	0	0	0
NON-CONTIGUOUS	1	2	1	2	2	2
Alaska	0	0	0	0	0	0
Hawaii	1	2	1	2	2	2
US totals	42	47	46	66	67	72

Source: Calculated from BYB 1:101–3; BW 2:182–90; 3:217–27.

Notes: 1. LSAs and recognized groups.

Region	Local spiritual assemblies (LSAs)			Total listed localities <sup>1</sup>		
	1925	1928	1930	1925	1928	1930
Austria	0	0	0	2	2 <sup>2</sup>	2
Denmark	0	0	0	0	1	1
France	1	1	1	1	1 <sup>3</sup>	2
Germany	U	U [5] <sup>4</sup>	5	26	37	38
Hungary	0	0	0	0	0	1
Irish Free State <sup>5</sup>	0	0	0	U	U	2
Italy	0	0	0	4	6	6
Netherlands (Holland)	0	0	0	0	0	1
Norway	0	0	0	0	0	1
Poland	0	0	0	0	0	1
Russia	U	1	1	U	2	2
Sweden	0	0	0	1	2	2
Switzerland	U	1	1	2	4	3
United Kingdom	[3] <sup>6, 7</sup>	4 <sup>6, 8</sup>	3 <sup>6</sup>	3 <sup>6</sup>	4 <sup>6</sup>	12 <sup>5</sup>
Yugoslavia (Jugoslavia)	0	0	0	0	1	1
European totals	U	12 <sup>4</sup>	11	39	60	75

*Table 6: Local spiritual assemblies and localities in Europe, 1925–30.*

Source: Calculated from BYB 1:101–3; BW 2:182–90; 3:217–27.

Key: U = Unavailable or incomplete.

Notes: 1. 'Baha'i centres' for 1925; LSAs and recognized groups for 1928 and 1930.

2. Two separate groups recorded for Vienna, but here counted as one.
3. Two separate groups recorded for Paris but here counted as one.
4. Five German LSAs assumed (as per 1930). Original data undifferentiated.
5. Listed under 'British Isles'.
6. Listed under 'England'.
7. Three UK local assemblies assumed. Original data undifferentiated.
8. Includes two separate local assemblies for the Greater Manchester area.

in Germany; 12 localities (16%) in the United Kingdom; and six countries with only a single locality each. Of note is the meagre development of local Baha'i administration as compared to North America: while the two continents had almost the same number of localities by 1930, Europe had far fewer local assemblies: 11 (out of 75 localities, or 15%) compared to North

Country	LSAs			Total listed localities <sup>1</sup>		
	1925	1928	1930	1925	1928	1930
Australia incl Tasmania, Norfolk Is.	U	6	6	6	6	6
New Zealand	U	1	1	1	1	2
Fiji Islands	0	0	0	0	1	1
Society Islands (Tahiti)	0	0	0	0	1	1
<i>Totals</i>	<i>U</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>9</i>	<i>10</i>

*Table 7: Local spiritual assemblies and localities in Australasia, 1925–30.*

*Source:* Calculated from BYB 1:101–3; BW 2:182–90; 3:217–27.

*Key:* U = Unavailable or incomplete.

*Notes:* 1. 'Baha'i centres' for 1925; LSAs and recognized groups for 1928 and 1930.

America's 48 (out of 74 localities or 65%). Most of these assemblies were in Germany (5) or Britain (3), with ten of the European countries in which there were Baha'is never establishing a local spiritual assembly during this period.

## 5. Australasia

The only relatively substantial Baha'i community in the Pacific at this time was that of Australia (6 local assemblies/localities) (Table 7). There was also a small, active community in New Zealand, but apart from Fiji and Tahiti there were no Baha'is living in the rest of the Pacific.

## 6. Asia

Outside of the Middle East, the only major Asian Baha'i community during this period was that of India and Burma (with eventually 17 localities and 8 local assemblies between them), linked under a joint national Baha'i administration (Table 8). There were at the time no Baha'is in other parts of South Asia (Bhutan, Ceylon [Sri Lanka] and Nepal). In South-East Asia there were isolated Baha'is in the Dutch East Indies (modern Indonesia) and the Philippines, but no local assemblies were formed. There were no Baha'is in the British colonies of Borneo, Malaya and Singapore, nor in French Indo-China or Siam. There was a minimal Baha'i presence in East Asia (one local assembly each in China and Japan, and briefly one in Korea).

## 7. Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean

There was only a minimal Baha'i presence in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America during the 1920s, with only two local assemblies formed in Africa (in South Africa and South-West Africa) and one in Latin America (Brazil) (Table 9).

Country	LSAs			Total listed localities <sup>1</sup>		
	1925	1928	1930	1925	1928	1930
India	U	4	4	5	9	10
Burma	U	3	4	4	5	7
Dutch East Indies	0	0	0	0	0	1
Philippines	0	0	0	0	1	1
China	U	1	1	1	1	1
Hong Kong	0	0	0	0	1	1
Japan	U	1	1	1	2	2
Korea	0	1	0	0	1	0
<i>Totals</i>	<i>U</i>	10	10	11	20	23

*Table 8: Local spiritual assemblies and localities in Asia, 1925–30.*

*Source:* Calculated from BYB 1:101–3; BW 2:182–90; 3:217–27.

*Key:* U = Unavailable or incomplete.

*Notes:* 1. 'Baha'i centres' for 1925; LSAs and recognized groups for 1928 and 1930.

Country	LSAs			Total listed localities <sup>1</sup>		
	1925	1928	1930	1925	1928	1930
SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA						
South Africa	1	1	1	1	1	3
South West Africa <sup>2</sup>	0	0	1	0	0	2
Rhodesia	0	0	0	0	0	1
<i>Totals</i>	1	1	2	1	1	6
LATIN AMERICA						
Brazil	U	1	1	1	1	2
<i>Totals</i>	<i>U</i>	1	1	1	1	2

*Table 9: Local spiritual assemblies and localities in Africa and Latin America, 1925–30.*

*Source:* Calculated from BYB 1:101–3; BW 2:182–90; 3:217–27.

*Key:* U = Unavailable or incomplete.

*Notes:* 1. 'Baha'i centres' for 1925; LSAs and recognized groups for 1928 and 1930.

2. Listed under South Africa.

Almost the whole of sub-Saharan Africa (then mostly under colonial control), Latin America and the Caribbean had no Baha'is.

## 8. National spiritual assemblies

During the 1920s, nine national spiritual assemblies or their equivalent were in existence: Iran (Persia), Iraq and Egypt in the Middle East; the Caucasus and Turkestan in Soviet Asia; Germany and the British Isles (variously styled 'Great Britain and Ireland' (1925), 'Great Britain' (1928) and 'the British Isles (1930)) in Europe; and joint assemblies for India and Burma and for the United States and Canada (BYB 1:101; BW 2:181; BW 3:217). Several of these bodies had roots in earlier administrative bodies, and they were not identical in their method of functioning – most obviously in the cases of Iran and Iraq, where the old system of central coordinating assemblies apparently continued into the 1930s.<sup>4</sup> The difficulties experienced by the two Soviet assemblies in the face of official government persecution are indicated by the fact that both had mail forwarding addresses in London.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the difficulties faced by the Baha'is in the Middle East and Soviet Asia, it will be noted that over half (five out of nine) of the national spiritual assemblies in the world were in this region during the period under consideration (Iran, Egypt, Iraq, Turkestan and the Caucasus).

## 9. Total population

It is not yet possible to come to any firm conclusion about the size of the global Baha'i population during the 1920s. The most important gap in our knowledge is the number of Baha'is in Iran and other parts of the 'Islamic heartland', particularly in Soviet Asia. There is no certain information here, and my 'best guesses' – perhaps 100,000–200,000 Baha'is in Iran, 5,000 in Soviet Asia and at most 2,000 in Turkey and the Arab world – are no more than conjectures. Only detailed research by area specialists will bring us any nearer to more reliable estimates. As I have argued elsewhere, the Iranian figures need to be placed within a timeframe for the overall development of the community from the Babi period to the present day, and this throws into question the extremely optimistic statements that were sometimes made about Baha'i growth in Iran at the time.<sup>6</sup> Again, estimates of the Iranian Baha'i population must also take into consideration the changing definition of Baha'i membership (Shoghi Effendi encouraged the Baha'is to prepare accurate membership lists and we should not assume that everyone wanted to be listed, especially as the Iranian Baha'is were still subject to persecution) and the broader question of what exactly it meant to be a Baha'i in a large community that had been in existence for several generations: levels of commitment, involvement and identity presumably varied between core members, who were willing to give their lives for their religious beliefs, and less committed members on the periphery; children of Baha'is might drift away from the Faith but still be regarded as Baha'is by those hostile to the Faith; many individuals who were not formally Baha'is might nevertheless be sympathizers and consider themselves to be 'Baha'is in their hearts'.

Estimates are easier to make for Baha'is in areas outside of the Middle East, where members of the various – generally small – Baha'i groups were

4. A specific local assembly (Tehran and Baghdad respectively) acted as the coordinating body for the Baha'is throughout the country, in contrast with the system of Baha'i administration adopted from 1923 onwards, in which national assemblies are elected annually, normally in a delegate convention representing the national or regional community as a whole. A listing of 'National and Regional Spiritual Assembly Formation' prepared by the Department of Statistics at the Baha'i World Centre in January 1989 gives the following 'official' dates for the formation of the national bodies under the new system:
  - 1923: British Isles; Germany and Austria; India and Burma.
  - 1924: Egypt and Sudan.
  - 1925: Caucasus; Turkestan; United States and Canada.
  - 1931: Iraq.
  - 1934: Persia (Iran).
5. Care of Ziaullah Azgharzadih. The two assemblies were dissolved in 1939.
6. Peter Smith, 'A note on Babi and Baha'i numbers in Iran', *Iranian Studies* 17:2–3 (1984) 295–301. For an example of what I would consider as an overly high figure, leading Tehrani Baha'i Mirza 'Ali-Muhammad Ibn-i Asdaq reported to J. E. Esslemont in 1919 that there were two or three million Baha'is in Iran (out of what he thought was a total population of 10

to 15 million, i.e. he believed that one-fifth of all Iranians were Baha'is). By contrast, his estimate for Tehran (10,000 Baha'is in a city population of 750,000 [0.01%]), seems plausible (see Moojan Momen, 'Esslemont's survey of the Bahā'ī world, 1919–1920', in *Bahā'ī in the West* (ed. P. Smith, Los Angeles: Kalimāt Press, 2004) 70).

7. United States, Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Census of Religious Bodies, 1926* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1929–30), vol. 2, pp. 70–6.
8. Peter Smith, 'Shoghi Effendi and the Baha'is of India and Burma during the 1920s', *Baha'i Studies Review* 13 (2005) 15–40.

often recent converts (although again, it must be remembered that membership criteria were becoming more rigorous at this time, eventually excluding individuals who had formerly been considered Baha'is but whose involvement, commitment and identity were or became more peripheral). Thus, for North America, the US national census for 1926 recorded a figure of 1,247 Baha'is,<sup>7</sup> and even if the figure is raised by the inclusion of close sympathizers and others not definitely enrolled in the movement and the addition of a couple of dozen in Canada, the total is likely to be less than 2,000. India and Burma may similarly have had about 2,000 Baha'is.<sup>8</sup> The rest of the world – Europe, East and South-East Asia, Australasia, Latin America and sub-Saharan Africa – is unlikely to have had more than 1,000 Baha'is.

These guesstimates give us a maximum total of 7,000 Baha'is worldwide outside of Iran and the culturally cognate Baha'i communities of Soviet Asia (most of whose members were emigré Iranians) – a not insignificant number for a relatively new religious movement that had only recently begun to break out of its traditional religious and cultural milieu and become a genuinely international movement.

#### Suggested citation

Smith, P. (2008), 'The Global Distribution of Baha'is in the 1920s', *Baha'i Studies Review* 14, pp. 109–122. doi: 10.1386/bsr.14.109/7

#### Contributor details

Dr Peter Smith is head of the Social Science Division at Mahidol University International College, Thailand, where he lectures in world history and anthropology. He is the author of several books and a number of articles on Babi–Baha'i Studies. E-mail: peter@thai-bahais.org