



ĀĠĀ MOḤAMMAD KHAN QĀJĀR

ĀĠĀ MOḤAMMAD KHAN QĀJĀR (r. 1203-12/1789-97), founder of the Qajar dynasty (q.v.). He was born about 1155/1742, the eldest son of the chief of the Qavānlū (Qoyunlū) clan of the Qajars of Astarābād, Moḥammad-Ḥasan Khan, whose father, Faṭḥ-‘Alī Khan, had been executed by Ṭahmāsb II (perhaps at the instigation of the future Nāder Shah). Subsequently the Qavānlū and the Ašāqabāš branch of the Qajars to which they belonged were dominated by the rival Develū clan of the Yūkārībāš branch. Moḥammad-Ḥasan was a fugitive on the Turkman steppe during Nāder’s reign. On the latter’s death in 1160/1747, Moḥammad-Ḥasan threatened Astarābād in a bid to recover power; and Nāder’s successor ‘Ādel Shah marched against him from Mašhad. He failed to lure the Qajar leader into his power but captured his young son Moḥammad and had him castrated before freeing him; hence Moḥammad’s title of *āḡā*, which was commonly given to senior court eunuchs.

For the next ten years, while the Afsharid state of Khorasan fell victim to the rapacity of rival chieftains and incursions by Aḥmad Shah Dorrānī of Afghanistan, Moḥammad-Ḥasan battled against Āzād Khan Afḡān and Karīm Khan Zand for control of the western portion of Nāder’s empire. He was defeated in 1172/1759 by the Zand army and killed by a renegade; Astarābād fell and was placed under a Develū governor; and Moḥammad-Ḥasan’s two eldest sons, Āḡā Moḥammad and Ḥosayn-qolī, took refuge on the steppe. A year later, after a raid on Astarābād, Āḡā Moḥammad was pursued by the



governor and fled to Ašraf (present-day Behšahr), where he was intercepted and sent as a captive to Karīm Khan in Tehran. The Zand leader treated him with every honor and kindness, and urged him to persuade the remaining Qavānlū refugees to give themselves up. This they did; they were settled on the family estates in Dāmġān, and on the conclusion of Karīm Khan's Azarbaijan campaign in 1177/1763, Āġā MoĤammad and Ḥosayn-qolī were escorted to the Zand capital of Shiraz.

By all accounts, Āġā MoĤammad was treated more as an honored guest than a prisoner throughout his sixteen years at Karīm Khan's court. Though notionally a hostage for the good behavior of his kinsmen, he was not so used. Even when Ḥosayn-qolī Khan, whom Karīm Khan had appointed to govern Dāmġān, opened up a campaign against the Develū of Astarābād, an act which was tantamount to rebellion against Zand suzerainty (and in which he may have been secretly encouraged by his brother), Karīm assured Āġā MoĤammad that he would not be the object of a reprisal (E'temād-al-salṭana, *Montaẓam-e Nāṣerī* II, Tehran, 1299/1882, p. 314). By his own admission to his nephew, the future Faṭḥ-'Alī Shah, Āġā MoĤammad used to vent his frustration and resentment by ripping up with a penknife the rug on which he sat each morning for breakfast with his host; the latter pretended not to notice and ordered the servants to spread a new rug each day (Jalāl-al-dīn Eḥtešām-al-molk, *Nāma-ye ƙosravān* III, Tehran, 1288/1871, p. 132; J. Malcolm, *The History of Persia* II, London, 1829, p. 177). Karīm Khan recognized his guest's political sagacity and is said to have consulted him on affairs of state and to have referred to him as his Pīrān-e Vēas—a reference to Afrāsīāb's wise counselor.

Āġā MoĤammad's favorite recreation was hunting, which would sometimes take him away from Shiraz for days at a time. As Karīm Khan's health deteriorated in 1193/1779, Āġā MoĤammad rode out daily, ostensibly to hunt, and was kept informed of the ruler's condition by his sister or aunt, who were in Karīm's household. On the evening of 13 Šafar/March 2, learning that the Zand ruler had breathed his last, he galloped away with a handful of trusted retainers and three days later reached Isfahan. In Shiraz, internecine war had broken out even before Karīm's corpse was buried. The Qajar fugitive continued north to find the task of mobilizing his tribe complicated by his half brother Mortaẓā-qolī, who rebelled and denied him access to Astarābād. For almost a decade, Āġā MoĤammad was involved in a ceaseless campaign of warfare, diplomacy, and treachery to unify the Qajar factions, to expand and consolidate his hold on Iran's northern provinces, to stave off threats from his



brothers Mortazā-qolī and Reżā-qolī, and to defeat successive Zand pretenders. At an early stage he clashed with the Russians, who gave refuge to Mortazā-qolī on his defeat. In 1781 a naval expedition under Count Voinovich attempted to establish a fortified trading post near Ašraf; but the Qajar chief invited the officers to an entertainment, took them prisoner, and obliged them to dismantle their fort and sail home (G. Forster, *A Journey from Bengal to England* . . . , London, 1798, II, pp. 201-02). A serious threat developed in the south, where 'Alī-Morād Khan Zand, in control of Isfahan from 1780 to 1784, mounted several campaigns against the Qajars and in 1197/1782 temporarily drove them back from Sārī to Astarābād. On 'Alī-Morād's death, Āgā Moḥammad three times drove the forces of his successor Ja'far Khan from Isfahan back to Shiraz, and became undisputed master of the northern half of Iran. The better to dominate both sides of the Alborz, Āgā Moḥammad now transferred his center from Sārī to Tehran, where he repaired the fortifications (Malcolm, *History* II, pp. 131, 180). Here in 1203/1788-89 he was enthroned (though not yet crowned); and soon afterwards he designated his nephew Bābā Khan (the future Faṭḥ-'Alī Shah) as heir apparent (*Montaẓam-e Nāṣerī* III, p. 49). It therefore seems appropriate to take this point as the effective start of his reign and of the Qajar dynasty.

In 1206/1791 he was faced with renewed attacks on Gilān by Mortazā-qolī Khan and an advance on Isfahan by Loṭf-'Alī Khan, the courageous and popular young Zand prince who had again rallied support in Fārs. Ḥājjī Ebrāhīm, the *kalāntar* of Shiraz, engineered a coup in the Zand army and denied entry to Loṭf-'Alī on his retreat. The latter recruited a fresh cavalry force and defeated the Qajars three times before Āgā Moḥammad marched on Shiraz, which was handed over to him by Ḥājjī Ebrāhīm in 1792. The Qajar leader transported the remaining Zands, along with 12,000 families of their supporters from various Lak and Lor tribes, to Astarābād and Māzandarān; he demolished the walls of the city and, not content with all movable booty, had the pillars and doors of the palace taken to Tehran. Loṭf-'Alī Khan fled eastwards and in 1209/1794 was besieged in Kermān, whence he fled to Bam. Āgā Moḥammad's conduct at Kermān has come down as an exemplar of brutality: Nearly 20,000 women and children were given as slaves to the soldiers, and all adult males were either put to death or blinded. Loṭf-'Alī Khan was betrayed to the Qajars by the governor of Bam and tortured and mutilated before being sent to Tehran for execution. On his return to Shiraz, Āgā Moḥammad appointed his heir, Bābā Khan, governor-general of Fārs, Kermān, and Yazd, and made Ḥājjī Ebrāhīm his grand vizier (*ṣadr-e a'zam*). Suspicious



of his brother Jaʿfar-qolī, whom he refused the governorship of Isfahan, he inveigled him to Tehran under pledge of safe-conduct and had him assassinated. He was now master of the whole of the erstwhile Zand empire and laid plans to recover the former Safavid territories lost on Nāder Shah’s death.

In 1783 King Erekli II of the Georgian provinces of Kartli-Kakheti (the Safavid tributary of Gorjestān), having secured virtual autonomy since 1747, sought to preserve this through an offensive and defensive alliance with Russia concluded at Giorgievsk. Āġā Moḥammad in vain ordered Erekli to acknowledge his suzerainty and, in the spring of 1210/1796, marched on the provinces beyond the Aras to enforce his claims. From Ardabīl he divided his army of some 60,000 into three columns; the first was to advance through the Moġān steppe and collect arrears of tribute, the second to take Erivan, and the third, which he personally commanded, to reduce the strategic fortress of Shusha held by Ebrāhīm Kalīl Khan of Qarabāġ. The second two corps both failed to take their objectives and, after forces had been detached to maintain a blockade, joined the first column in a direct advance on Tiflis. Erekli’s army, heavily outnumbered, was defeated, and Tiflis savagely sacked; the old and infirm and the priests were massacred, and at least 15,000 able-bodied men and women taken into slavery. The Russians, having underestimated Āġā Moḥammad’s determination and generalship, had no troops south of the Caucasus to help their new protectorate. Erivan capitulated, though Shusha held out. Satisfied for the time being, the Qajar leader returned via the Moġān steppe, the scene of Nāder Shah’s coronation. Here in Ramażān, 1210/ March, 1796, he was officially crowned shah of Iran. At Ardabīl he girded on the ceremonial sword of the Safavid shahs, leaving no doubts as to his ambitions.

He immediately marched on Mašhad, ostensibly on pilgrimage, but in fact to reclaim Khorasan as part of the Safavid patrimony. The aging Šāhroḡ Shah, a puppet in the hands of the tribal leaders and his son Nāder Mīrzā (who fled to Afghanistan), was deposed (see [Afsharids](#)). He was tortured to reveal where he had hidden the remaining jewels from Nāder Shah’s hoard of Indian booty and died on his way to captivity in Tehran. Envoys were also sent to demand the restoration of the other centers of greater Khorasan: to the Uzbek ruler, Begī Jān, for the return of Marv and of Iranian captives in Bukhara; to Zamān Shah Dorrānī in Kabul, for the cession of Balk; and to his son Maḥmūd in Herat, demanding the surrender of that city. Āġā Moḥammad’s ability to enforce all these demands was not put to the test, for that autumn the Empress



Catherine II, to avenge the sack of Tiflis, dispatched an army under the twenty-four-year-old Valerian Zubov which, by the end of the season, had subjugated all the Caspian littoral up to the Moġān steppe and appeared poised for a march on Tehran. However, Catherine died in November, and her successor Paul immediately reversed his mother's policy and recalled the army. Āġā Moġammad, having returned to Tehran, launched a second campaign across the Aras the following spring. Ebrāhīm Ḳalīl Khan was ousted from the fortress of Shusha by a coup d'état, and Āġā Moġammad was invited to take control. Crossing the swollen Aras on boats (Ebrāhīm Khan had demolished the bridge and breached the dykes), the Qajar army secured the strongpoint and prepared to march on Georgia.

At this juncture, a trivial incident in the camp brought about Āġā Moġammad's death and put an end not only to this campaign but to all Qajar aspirations north of the Aras. According to most accounts, two servants, Šādeq Khan the Georgian and Ḳodādād Ešfahānī, began quarrelling so loudly that the shah ordered both to be executed. One of his commanders, Šādeq Khan Šaqāqī, interceded in vain; but Āġā Moġammad consented to postpone the execution until after the imminent Friday holiday. With incredible self-confidence, he allowed the condemned men freely to go about their duties in the meantime. With nothing to lose (and perhaps urged on by the ambitious Šādeq Khan Šaqāqī), they enlisted a third servant, 'Abbās Māzandarānī, and that same night (21 Du'l-ḥeġġa 1211/17 June 1797) stabbed the shah to death. They handed over the crown jewels to Šādeq Khan, who took the killers under his protection and led his troops on Tabrīz. The rest of the army disintegrated, except for detachments from Fārs and Māzandarān, which Ḥāġġī Ebrāhīm rallied and led back to Tehran (Fasā'ī, I, pp. 242-43).

Āġā Moġammad's salient characteristics were those which caused his death: avarice and cruelty. Yet such was his energy, ambition, and intelligence that he usually directed even his least praiseworthy qualities towards the achievement of his aims. Obsessively acquisitive of money and jewels, he nevertheless shunned pomp and ostentation, lived as austerely as his soldiers, and ensured that these were regularly paid. He showed a real concern for law and order, regularly prayed and fasted, yet also drank heavily. But Forster, who observed him at Sārī during the 1780's, remarks that "this habit does not seem to operate to the prejudice of the people. This chief has the reputation of being attentive to business . . . which is indeed obvious to common notice" (*Journey I*, p. 198). Like his predecessors, Nāder Shah and Karīm Khan, he kept



executive power tightly in his own control, using his ministers as little more than informants and secretaries; however, he appreciated able men such as Ḥājji Ebrāhīm and knew how far to trust them. His acts of cruelty can usually be interpreted as politic or exemplary, to terrorize the disaffected (as at Kermān), or to ensure unquestioning obedience. He would often disembowel servants who displeased him and expose them, still alive, to the kites and crows (R. G. Watson, *A History of Persia . . .*, London, 1866, pp. 66-67). Often, however, he was gratuitously vindictive; while at Shiraz, he exhumed the bones of Karīm Khan and had them reburied under the threshold of his palace at Tehran, so that he might daily trample on the grave of his predecessor in empire. There are likewise tales of the cruel revenge he took on obscure Shiraz tradesmen who had slighted him during his stay in the Zand capital; and once, while drunk, he shot and wounded his secretary for no reason (M. von Kotzebue, *Narrative of a Journey into Persia . . .*, London, 1818, pp. 256-58).

It has been suggested that his early castration and long captivity served to channel his energies into planning and ultimately realizing the Qajar triumph (Malcolm, *History II*, p. 176). In contrast to near-contemporaries such as Zakī Khan Zand or even Nāder Shah, with whom he might easily be compared in cruelty, rapacity, and military zeal, he was able to harness—and where necessary subordinate—his passions to long-term dynastic interests. This is evident in his conciliation of his Yūḳārībāš enemies, his careful provision for the succession, and his concern for administrative detail. His irredentist campaigns must on balance be adjudged failures; he recovered only the western portion of greater Khorasan and, by totally alienating Georgia and Russia, effectively fixed Iran’s subsequent north-western frontier at the river Aras. However, it is chiefly owing to his eighteen years of tireless conquest and consolidation that Iran (in its modern extent) was finally integrated under a single monarch and thus enabled to weather the storms of the 19th and early 20th centuries.

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