



AMĪR KABĪR, MĪRZĀ TAQĪ KHAN

AMĪR(-E) KABĪR, MĪRZĀ TAQĪ KHAN (1222-68/1807-52), also known by the titles of Atābak and Amīr-e Neẓām; chief minister to Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah for the first four years of his reign and one of the most capable and innovative figures to appear in the whole Qajar period. He was born into a lowly household at Hazāva in the Farāhān district. His father, Karbalā'ī Moḥammad Qorbān, entered the service of Mīrzā Bozorg Qā'em-maqām of Farāhān as cook, and when Mīrzā Bozorg was appointed chief minister to 'Abbās Mīrzā, the crown prince, in Tabrīz, Karbalā'ī Qorbān accompanied him there, taking his son with him. Amīr Kabīr first assisted his father in performing domestic duties in the household of Mīrzā Bozorg, who saw signs of unusual talent in him and had him study with his own children. After he had learned reading, writing, and some mathematics, Amīr Kabīr, still an adolescent, was appointed by Mīrzā Bozorg to supervise his stables, a function he performed with exemplary efficiency. Mīrzā Bozorg died in 1237/1822 and was succeeded in the post of minister to the crown prince by his son, Mīrzā Abu'l-Qāsem Qā'em-maqām. Under his aegis Amīr Kabīr entered government service, being appointed first to the post of *laškarnevīs* "military registrar" for the army of Azarbaijan. In 1251/1835, he was promoted to the position of *mostawfī-e neẓām*, becoming responsible for supervising the finances of the army of Azarbaijan; several years later he was put in charge of the same army's provisions, financing, and organization with the title of *wazīr-e neẓām*.



Amīr Kabīr also participated in three foreign missions dispatched from Tabrīz. The first of these was the mission of Ẓosrow Mīrzā to St. Petersburg in 1244-45/1829-30, the major purpose of which was to offer official apologies for the death of Griboyedov, Russian minister in Tehran, at the hands of a mob. Amīr Kabīr acted as scribe, and in the ten months that the mission spent in Tiflis, Moscow, and St. Petersburg, he had the opportunity to visit public, private, technical, and military schools, an arsenal, a mint, a carriage factory, a glass factory, an observatory, banks, chambers of commerce, numerous theaters, and various ministries and divisions of the Russian bureaucracy. He did not leave any account of his impressions of Russia, but there can be little doubt that he observed carefully all that he saw and that many of his later reform measures owed their origin to Russian example; the industries that he chose to promote were mostly those he had seen flourishing in Russia (Ādamīyat, *Amīr Kabīr*, pp. 54-60, 166-81). In 1253/1837, he accompanied Nāṣer-al-dīn Mīrzā, then crown prince, on a journey to Erevan; there the prince met Tsar Nicholas I and then toured his Caucasian provinces. Amīr Kabīr was present at the audience the Tsar granted to Nāṣer-al-dīn, and it is even possible that he addressed a few words in Russian to the Tsar. But the journey was a brief one, and of little importance for Amīr Kabīr's subsequent career (*ibid.*, pp. 60-61). More significant were the almost four years that he spent in Erzurum, participating in the work of a commission to delineate the Ottoman-Iranian frontier and settle certain other differences between the two states. He appears to have been the most forceful member of the Iranian negotiating team, resisting attempts to exclude Moḥammara (present-day Ẓorramšahr) from Iranian sovereignty and to make Iran pay compensation for its military incursions into the area of Solaymāniya. In this he acted almost independently of the central government in Tehran, which not only failed to formulate a consistent policy vis-à-vis the Ottomans but also opposed most of Amīr Kabīr's initiatives. Although a form of treaty was concluded between Iran and the Ottoman State, the borders had still not been delineated when the Crimean War erupted and the British and Russian mediators found themselves at war and withdrew. Amīr Kabīr nonetheless acquired first-hand knowledge of the procedures of international diplomacy and of the aims and policies of Britain and Russia with respect to Iran. This helped him in the elaboration of his own distinct policies toward the two powers when he became chief minister. Moreover, his years in Erzurum fell in the period of the Ottoman military and administrative reforms known as the Tanzimat (*ibid.*, pp. 62-154, 181-84). Some awareness of these reached Amīr Kabīr in Erzurum and inspired in him at least one aspect of his policy as chief minister: the



elimination of clerical influence upon affairs of state. When explaining to the British consul at Tabrīz in 1265/1849 his own determination to make the authority of the state paramount, he said, “The Ottoman government was able to begin reviving its power only after breaking the power of the mullas” (quoted in *ibid.*, p. 184).

Amīr Kabīr returned to Tabrīz in 1263/1847. A year later, while retaining the post and title of *wazīr-e neẓām* he was appointed *lala-bāšī* or chief tutor to the crown prince Nāṣer-al-dīn, who was still only fifteen years of age. Soon after, in Šawwāl, 1264/September, 1848, Moḥammad Shah died, and Nāṣer-al-dīn had to proceed to Tehran and assume the throne. But his minister, Mīrzā Faṭḥallāh Naṣīr-al-molk ‘Alīābādī, was unable to procure the necessary funds, so Nāṣer-al-dīn had recourse to Amīr Kabīr, who made the necessary arrangements. Nāṣer-al-dīn’s confidence in Amīr Kabīr increased, and shortly after leaving Tabrīz, he awarded him the rank of *amīr-e neẓām*, with full responsibility for the whole Iranian army. After arriving in Tehran, he also appointed him chief minister (*šaḳṣ-e awwal-e Īrān*), with the supplementary titles of *amīr-e kabīr* and *atābak* (Dū’l-qa’da, 1264/October, 1848). The former title came to be his common designation; the latter, used for the first time since the Saljuq period, referred to the tutorial relationship between the minister and his young master, reflecting, perhaps, Amīr Kabīr’s view of himself as a semi-independent agent. His appointment as the chief minister aroused resentment in various persons who thought themselves more deserving, particularly Mīrzā Āqā Khan Nūrī E’temād-al-dawla, and also in the queen mother, who evidently resented Amīr Kabīr’s proud and self-confident bearing. The intrigues of his opponents resulted in a mutiny of a company of Azarbaijani troops garrisoned in Tehran, demanding his removal and execution (Rabī’ II, 1265/March, 1849); but with the cooperation of Mīrzā Abu’l-Qāsem Emām-e Jom’a of Tehran, who ordered the merchants of Tehran to close the bazaar and arm themselves, the mutiny was soon quelled, and Amīr Kabīr resumed his duties.

More severe disorder prevailed in a number of provincial cities, especially Mašhad. Toward the end of the reign of Moḥammad Shah, Ḥamza Mīrzā Hešmat-al-dawla had been appointed governor of Khorasan, but he found his authority disputed by Ḥasan Khan Sālār, who, with the help of some local chieftains, had rebelled against the central government (1262/1846). Ḥamza Mīrzā abandoned Mašhad to Ḥasan Khan and fled to Herat. Amīr Kabīr sent two armies against Ḥasan Khan, the second of which, commanded by Solṭān



Morād Mīrzā, defeated his forces and captured him. Amīr Kabīr had him executed (1266/1850), together with one of his sons and one of his brothers, a punishment of unprecedented severity for such provincial resistance to central authority, and a clear sign of Amīr Kabīr's intention to assert the prerogatives of the state (ibid., pp. 232-41). A task of equal importance that confronted him in the early days of his ministry was the repression of the Bābī insurrections that had coincided with the period of transition between Moḥammad Shah and Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah. Movements of rebellion were led in Māzandarān by Mollā Ḥosayn Bošrūyī and Mollā Moḥammad Bārforūšī, in Zanjān by Mollā Moḥammad Zanjānī, and in Nayrīz by Sayyed Yaḥyā Dārābī. After a series of bloody battles in 1266/1848, all three movements were defeated and their leaders executed. Wishing to prevent further outbreaks of Bābī insurrectionary fervor by doing away with the founder of Babism, Amīr Kabīr gave orders for the execution of Sayyed 'Alī-Moḥammad Bāb, which took place in Tabrīz on 27 Ša'bān 1266/8 July 1850. It is probable that his motives were purely political, and that he acted for the preservation of the state, not Shi'ite Islam.

With order reestablished in the provinces, Amīr Kabīr turned to a wide variety of administrative, cultural, and economic reforms that were the major achievement of his brief ministry. Faced with an empty treasury on his arrival in Tehran, he first set about balancing the state budget by attempting to increase the sources of revenue and to decrease state expenditure. To aid him in the task, he set up a budgetary committee headed by Mīrzā Yūsuf Mostawfī-al-mamālek that estimated the deficiency in the budget at one million tomans (about β500,000). Amīr Kabīr thereupon decided to reduce drastically the salaries of the civil service, often by half, and to eliminate a large number of stipends paid to pensioners who did little or no governmental work. This measure increased his unpopularity with many influential figures and thus contributed to his ultimate disgrace and death. At the same time he strove to collect overdue taxes from provincial governors and tribal chieftains by dispatching assessors and collectors to every province of the country. The collection of customs duties, previously farmed out to individuals, was now made the direct responsibility of the central government, and the Caspian fisheries, an important source of revenue, were recovered from a Russian monopoly and contracted out to Iranians. The administration of the royal lands (*kālešajāt*) came under review, and the income derived from them was more closely supervised than before. Yield and productivity, not area, were established as the basis of tax assessment for other lands, and previously dead



lands were brought under cultivation. These various measures for the encouragement of agriculture and industry also benefited the treasury by raising the level of national prosperity and hence taxability (ibid., pp. 265-85).

Other of Amīr Kabīr's early reforms related to military affairs, an area, like finance, in which he had acquired considerable experience while in Azarbaijan. Careful to avoid an increase in either British or Russian influence, he employed military instructors from Italy and Austria in continuation of the efforts of 'Abbās Mīrzā for the formation of a well-equipped and disciplined standing army. Military recruitment were based on the assessment of revenue in each village, district, or tribal area (*bonīča*); the number of men under arms was increased to almost 140,000, tribal levies were trained in the techniques of modern warfare, and for the first time separate brigades of Christian troops were raised from the Assyrians of Urmia and the Armenians of Jolfā near Isfahan. In order to lessen Iran's dependence on Britain and Russia for arms, Amīr Kabīr had armament factories built in Tehran, Khorasan, Azarbaijan, Fārs, and Isfahan, as well as a cannon foundry in Tehran. He also constructed fortresses in frontier regions and at certain strategic points within the country. Finally, the finances of the army were put on a sound and regular footing, and the arbitrary levying of supplies (*soyūrsāt*) by the army from the civilian population was forbidden (ibid., pp. 286-306, 321-24).

In his comprehensive concern for the strengthening of Iran, Amīr Kabīr displayed more interest in public works and the economy than all Iranian rulers put together had shown since the time of Shah 'Abbās I. He ordered the construction of a new bazaar in Tehran (known as the *bazār-e amīr*) and the completion of a canal from Karaĵ to Tehran that increased the capital's water supply. Two of the main squares, Maydān-e Tūpkāna and Sabza Maydān, were laid out in the time of Amīr Kabīr's ministry. Provincial cities witnessed the rise of important buildings: a citadel in Shiraz, a new commercial center in Isfahan, a barracks in Moḥammara. Factories were established with state patronage for the manufacture of items as diverse as carriages, stoves and samovars, crystal and ceramics, rope, silk and broadcloth, and sugar. Craftsmen were sent to Moscow and St. Petersburg to learn various industrial techniques, and others to Istanbul to study silk weaving. Tariffs were raised to discourage the import of foreign goods and to promote the products of the newly founded industries. Efforts were made to prevent the export of gold and silver from Iran, and a decree issued in 1267/1851 stipulated that any Iranian subject might freely engage in the mining of minerals and precious stones,



having once obtained the permission of the government, and that his operations would be exempt from taxation for the first five years. A certain number of foreign geologists were also recruited to aid in the extraction of Iran's mineral wealth.

Of particular interest is the care shown by Amīr Kabīr for the economic development of Kūzestān (then known as 'Arabestān), identified by him as an area of strategic importance, given its location at the head of the Persian Gulf, and also of potential prosperity. He introduced the planting of sugarcane to the province, built the Nāṣerī dam on the river Karḡa and a bridge at Šūštar, and laid plans for the development of Moḡammara. He also took steps to promote the planting of American cotton near Tehran and Urmia.

Among the various measures enacted by Amīr Kabīr, the foundation of the Dār al-Fonūn in Tehran was possibly the most lasting in its effects. The initial purpose of the institution was to train officers and civil servants to pursue the regeneration of the state that Amīr Kabīr had begun, but as the first educational institution giving instruction in modern learning, it had far wider impact. Among the subjects taught were medicine, surgery, pharmacology, natural history, mathematics, geology, and natural science. The instructors were for the most part Austrians, recruited in Vienna by Dā'ūd Khan, an Assyrian who had become acquainted with Amīr Kabīr during the work of the Ottoman-Iranian border commission. By the time the instructors arrived in Tehran in Moḡarram, 1268/November, 1851, Amīr Kabīr had already been dismissed, and it fell to Dā'ūd Khan to receive them. Mīrzā Āqā Khan Nūrī, Amīr Kabīr's successor, sought to persuade Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah to abrogate the whole project, but the Dār al-Fonūn soon became a posthumous monument to its founder. The Austrian instructors initially knew no Persian, so interpreters had to be employed to assist in the teaching; but some among them soon learned Persian well enough to compose textbooks in the language on various natural sciences. These were to influence the evolution of a more simple and effective prose style in Persian than had previously existed.

Amīr Kabīr made a second indirect contribution to the elaboration of Persian as a modern medium with his foundation of the newspaper *Rūz-nāma-ye waqāye'-e ettefāqīya*, which survived under different titles until the reign of Moḡaffar-al-dīn Shah. A minimum circulation was ensured by requiring every official earning more than 2000 rials a year to subscribe. In founding the journal Amīr Kabīr hoped to give greater effect to government decrees by bringing them to the attention of the public; thus the text of the decree



forbidding the levying of *soyūrsāt* was published in the third tissue of the paper. He also wished to educate its readers in the world's political and scientific developments; among the items reported in the first year of publication were the struggles of Mazzini against the Habsburg Empire, the drawing up of the Suez Canal project, the invention of the balloon, a census of England, and the doings of cannibals in Borneo.

All of the measures enumerated so far had as their purpose the creation of a well-ordered and prosperous country, with undisputed authority exercised by the central government. This purpose was in part frustrated by the '*olamā*', who throughout the Qajar period disputed the legitimacy of the state and often sought to exercise an independent and rival authority. Amīr Kabīr took a variety of steps designed to curb their influence, above all in the sphere of law. He sought initially to supersede the *šar'* courts in the capital by sitting in judgment himself on cases brought before him; he abandoned the attempt when he realized that the inadequacy of his juridical knowledge had caused him to pronounce incorrect verdicts. Then he established indirect control over the *šar'* courts by giving prominence to one of them that enjoyed his special favor and by assigning the *dīvān-kāna*, the highest instance of '*orf*' jurisdiction, a more prominent role. All cases were to be referred to it before being passed on to a *šar'* court of the state's choosing, and any verdict the *šar'* court then reached was valid only if endorsed by the *dīvān-kāna*. In addition, any case involving a member of the non-Muslim minorities belonged exclusively to the jurisdiction of the *dīvān-kāna*. Not content with thus circumscribing the prerogatives of the *šar'* courts, Amīr Kabīr took stringent measures against *šar'* judges found guilty of bribery or dishonesty; thus Mollā 'Abd-al-Raḥīm Borūjerdī was expelled from Tehran when he offered to settle a case involving one of Amīr Kabīr's servants to the liking of the minister. Amīr Kabīr also sought to reduce clerical power by restricting the ability of the '*olamā*' to grant refuge (*bast*), in their residences and the mosques under their control, to criminals and others pursued by the state. In 1266/1850, *bast* was abolished, for example, at the Mašjed-e Šāh in Tehran, although it was restored after the downfall of Amīr Kabīr. In Tabrīz, prolonged efforts were made to preserve *bast* at various mosques in the city, and recourse was even had to the alleged miracle of a cow that twice escaped the slaughterhouse by running into the shrine known as Boq'a-ye Šāḥeb-al-amr. The immediate instigators of the "miracle" were brought to Tehran, and soon after the *emām-e ǰom'a* and *šayḳ-al-eslām* of Tabrīz, who had reduced civil government in the city to virtual impotence, were expelled. Less capable of fulfillment was Amīr Kabīr's desire



to prohibit the ta'zīa, the Shi'ite "passion play" enacted in Moḥarram, as well as the public self-flagellation that took place during the mourning season. He obtained the support of several 'olamā' in his attempt to prohibit these rites, but was obliged to relent in the face of strong opposition, particularly from Isfahan and Azarbaijan.

Amīr Kabīr took a benevolent interest in the non-Muslim minorities of Iran, largely to further his desire of strengthening the state. While in Erzurum he had learned of the fashion in which the European powers intervened in Ottoman affairs on the pretext of "protecting" the Christian minorities, and there were indications that Britain, Russia, and France hoped for similar benefits from the Assyrians and Armenians of Iran. He moved therefore to remove any possible grievances and hence any need for a foreign "protector." He exempted the priests of all denominations from taxation, and gave material support to Christian schools in Azarbaijan and Isfahan. In addition, he established a close relationship with the Zoroastrians of Yazd, and gave strict orders to the governor of the city that they not be molested or subjected to arbitrary taxes. He also forbade attempts made in Šūštar to convert forcibly the Sabeen community to Islam.

The foreign policy of Amīr Kabīr was as strikingly innovative as his internal policies. He has been credited with originating the policy of "negative equilibrium," i.e., refusing concessions to both of the rival powers pressing on Iran, Britain and Russia, and avoiding alignment with either of them. He abrogated the agreement whereby the Russians were to operate a trade center and hospital in Astarābād, and attempted to put an end to the Russian occupation of Āšūrādā, an island in the southeastern corner of the Caspian Sea, as well as the anchorage rights enjoyed by Russian ships in the lagoon of Anzalī. In the south of Iran he made similar efforts to restrict British influence in the Persian Gulf, and denied Britain the right to stop Iranian ships in the Gulf on the pretext of looking for slaves. It is not surprising that he frequently clashed with Dolgorukiy and Sheil, the representatives of Russia and Britain in Tehran. In order to counteract British and Russian influence, he sought to establish relations with powers without direct interests in Iran, notably Austria and the United States. It may finally be noted that he set up a counter-espionage organization that had agents in the Russian and British embassies.

The fruitful career of Amīr Kabīr came to a sudden end on 20 Moḥarram 1268/16 November 1851, when Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah dismissed him from the position of chief minister. Five days later, he was stripped of all his other titles



and functions. Soon after he was sent under armed escort to Kāšān, and after a period of forty days' confinement was put to death in the bathhouse at Fīn, outside Kāšān, by the slashing of his wrists (17 Rabī' I 1268/10 January 1852). The executioner, 'Alī Khan Moqaddam, had entered government service as a protégé of Amīr Kabīr. The downfall and death of Amīr Kabīr are to be attributed primarily to the continuing intrigues of the same persons who had opposed him when he was first appointed chief minister: Āqā Khan Nūrī and the queen mother. It appears that they persuaded Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah that Amīr Kabīr was planning to depose him and mount the throne himself. The young shah may have been inclined to believe these accusations because of a certain arrogance and disdain for protocol that Amīr Kabīr had shown since the beginning of his government career in Tabrīz.

Contemporary and near-contemporary European observers all formed favorable impressions of Amīr Kabīr, seeing in him a unique embodiment of honesty, patriotism, and efficiency. Among his Iranian contemporaries Amīr Kabīr received praise from several poets of the age, notably Sorūš and Qā'ānī, but his services to Iran remained generally unappreciated in the Qajar period. Modern Iranian historiography has done him more justice, depicting him as one of the few capable and honest statesmen to emerge in the Qajar period and the progenitor of various political and social changes that came about half a century later. Amīr Kabīr should be seen primarily, however, as an unusually loyal and effective servant of the traditional state whose primary objective was the strengthening of the central government. He was only incidentally an agent of modernization and westernization, themes that were elaborated later by men of an ideological disposition alien to the great administrator and man of affairs that was Amīr Kabīr.

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