



ĀQĀ KHAN KERMĀNĪ

ĀQĀ KHAN KERMĀNĪ, MĪRZĀ ‘ABD-AL-ḤOSAYN (1270-1314/1854-55 to 1896), Iranian writer and intellectual, and an outstanding example of a first-generation secular nationalist. Born in 1270/1853-54 in Mašīz (Bardasīr), a village southwest of the city of Kermān. ‘Abd-al-Ḥosayn Khan ([Figure 1](#)), son of ‘Abd-al-Raḥīm, belonged to an important local family with a rich background in mysticism. He received a traditional education in Persian and Arabic languages, literature and grammar, rhetoric, logic, mathematics, jurisprudence, history, and theology. Preoccupied with moral ideas, he continued his studies in philosophy, a discipline traditionally considered the crown of all knowledge. Through one of his teachers, Ḥājjī Sayyed Jawād Karbalā’ī, he discovered Babism and apparently converted; but he continued to seek new ideologies and new faiths. In 1301/1883, a brief career as the tax collector of the district of Bardasīr, a responsibility forced upon him and relegated by him to others, ended after a heated argument with the governor, who held him responsible for the deficit in payments. Just over thirty years of age, he decided to leave his native province. After two years in Isfahan, where he found a job in the service of Z̄ell-al-soltān and joined a literary circle that was discussing “new and progressive ideas,” he spent a few months in Tehran and in 1303/1886 he went to Mašhad and from there, via Rašt and Bādkūba (Baku) to Istanbul, partly to escape the persistent attempt of Kermānī officials to have him extradited to Kermān. In the same year he made a brief trip to Cyprus where he met Mīrzā Yaḥyā Nūrī known as Šobḥ-e Azal, leader of the Bābī Azalī faction, and married his daughter. He stayed in the Ottoman capital for the remaining ten years of his life.



During the Istanbul period Mīrzā Āqā Khan became acquainted with western science and thought and wrote practically all his works. There he learned Ottoman Turkish and gained some fluency in French and English. He supported himself by copying manuscripts, teaching at the Iranian school of Istanbul, tutoring (his students included Cl. Huart), and contributing articles to the Istanbul Persian newspaper *Aktar* attacking the Persian government. In 1308/1890 he began corresponding with Mīrzā Malkom Khan (q.v.), the former Iranian ambassador to London who published a Persian political newspaper, *Qānūn*, in the British capital. Malkom's ambition was to set up secret cells fashioned on the freemasonry model in order to "awaken the Iranian masses from their intellectual and political torpor," and Mīrzā Āqā Khan was soon helping to distribute the paper and to establish an "Ādamīyat lodge" in the Turkish capital. He also collaborated in promoting and organizing the pan-Islamic movement with the famous reformer Sayyed Jamāl-al-dīn Afġānī (*Asadābādī*), who had come to Istanbul in 1310/1892. These actions along with his writings and Bābī affiliation outraged the Iranian government. The pan-Islamic, anti-shah activity of Afġānī and his followers was brought to light when some of their letters addressed to the Shi'ite *mojtaheds* residing in Iraq came to the attention of the Iranian consul in Baghdad. Ottoman authorities first resisted the demand of the Persian government for the arrest and extradition of Asadābādī and Mīrzā Āqā Khan, but the revolt of the Armenians in 1312-13/1894-95 changed the situation and Mīrzā Āqā Khan and two of his close companions, Shaikh Aḥmad Rūḥī and Mīrzā Ḥasan Khan Ḳabīr-al-molk, were charged with conspiracy, arrested, and sent to Trebizond (Rajab, 1312/January, 1895). A few months later, following the assassination of Nāṣer-al-dīn Shah (1313/1896) at the hand of an alleged Bābī closely associated with Afġānī, the three men were also charged with murder; in Du'l-ḥejja, 1313/May, 1896, they were extradited to Iran and executed in Tabrīz in Ṣafar, 1314/July, 1896.

Aside from his articles in *Aktar*, Mīrzā Āqā Khan wrote many political pamphlets, poems, and philosophical and theological treatises, all of which propounded Bābī, Islamic, and more often, modern scientific ideas, in a rather disorderly fashion. As a Shi'ite Muslim, he asserted the universal validity of the Koranic revelation and his faith in the expected return of the Twelfth Imam. As a Bābī, he defended the claims of the Azalī leader Mīrzā Yaḥyā Ṣobḥ-e Azal. Though in his Muslim and Bābī statements he asserted that religion is one of the greatest foundations of human thought, in his more scientific exposés he denounced all religions as mere superstitions and fantasies that originate from



humanity's fear and sense of helplessness in a wild physical environment. Wholeheartedly adopting Darwin's theory, he discussed the origins of the world in materialistic terms novel to Muslim and Bābī thought. But a careful analysis of Mīrzā Āqā Khan's religious ideas reveals him to be not so confused or inconsistent as one might, at first glance, believe (see Ādamīyat, *Andīshahā*, pp. 118-35). His diplomatic choice of terms and formulation of ideas reflects the desire to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, be it Muslim or Bābī, and to avoid any accusation of heresy; in this light, his Bābī and Muslim pronouncements may be seen as masks of expediency that he could put on and take off according to the situation. His main goal seems to have been the upholding of reason and modern science, both of which he viewed as directly and unavoidably opposed to religion. His lifetime struggle was in the name of Iran rather than Islam, which he came to blame for the political downfall and cultural decline of the Iranians. A chauvinistic, anti-Arab, and anti-Islamic color pervades his major works. He scornfully assailed the religious, educational, and political systems prevailing in Iran. Denouncing the Islamic legacy within Iranian culture, he claimed that Iran's authentic identity could be sought only in the pre-Islamic past; contrasting the "noble Aryan nation" that belonged to the "civilized Aryan people of good extraction" with the "savage, lizard-eaters," the Semitic Arab "desert-dwelling nomads," he vehemently asserted that Zoroastrianism was the religion most suited to the nature of Iran's inhabitants. In glorifying the ancient past, Mīrzā Āqā Khan more often than not viewed it in the light of his contemporary western liberal ideal. He believed that revolution was necessary to regenerate the nation, but he did not offer a systematic program, nor did he propose a sound, consistent ideology. Essentially, he called for the establishment of a constitutional parliamentary system of government to eliminate the power of the Qajars and for an "Islamic Protestantism" to crush the power of the 'olamā'. Such a "liberation," he argued, would turn popular attention to "national problems" and convert religious fanaticism into patriotic zeal. It would also bring about the reform of the educational system and the study of "meaningful" sciences. This dissemination of true knowledge would then lead to national strength.

Mīrzā Āqā Khan genuinely wished to see Iran modernize, so that its people would enjoy better living conditions and a better intellectual environment. He was one of the first Iranians to judge Iran by European standards and thus to perceive intellectual and social backwardness in the country. Unlike some of his contemporary statesmen and fellow revolutionaries in the 1880s and 1890s, he openly denounced Muslim institutions, the political regime, and the



educational system as the real causes of national stagnation. At that point, very few were prepared to agree with him; a quarter-century later, his words found an echo in the works of Aḥmad Kasravī.

The following is a list of Kermānī's works: (1) *Ketāb-e reżwān*, his first work, begun in 1295/1878 in Kermān, continued in Isfahan, and completed in Istanbul in 1304/1886-87, with later additions. An imitation of Sa'dī's *Golestān*, it contains proverbs, sayings, anecdotes, poems, and biographical notes. (2) *Āṭna-ye Eskandarī*, a history of Iran from earliest times to the rise of Islam. Begun in 1307/1889, it was probably finished in 1891 (published in 2 vols., Tehran, 1324-26/1906-08). The second part dealing with the history of Iran from the advent of Islam down to the Saljuqs is apparently lost. (3) *HĀrekmat-e naẓarī* and *Hašt behešt* (Tehran, 1339 Š./1960, including a biographical introduction by M. Afzal-al-molk Kermānī), two undated Bābī metaphysical treatises inspired by western and Muslim philosophical and theological concepts. Both volumes, intended as two parts of a single work, were written in collaboration with Shaikh Aḥmad Rūḥī in Istanbul. Although the authors state their intention to expound and analyze Bābī religious and philosophical concepts, they have, in fact, added ideas inspired by modern western secular thought. The second work can be confidently dated to 1892; E. G. Browne (*Materials for the Study of the Babi Religion*, Cambridge, 1918, p. 78) indicates that he received a recently completed manuscript of *Hašt behešt* in that year; the last chapter of that book refers to Bahā'allāh's death "a few months ago," and the Baha'i leader died in May, 1892. (4) *Haftād o do mellat*, a short essay largely based on a direct translation of Bernadin de Saint Pierre's *Café de Surat*, to which Mīrzā Āqā Khan added a few of his own ideas. A critique of the fanaticism and narrow-mindedness of all religions and sects, it was meant to be a preface to *Ḥekmat-e naẓarī* (Ādamīyat, *Andīšahā*, pp. 49-50), but was published separately as *Jang-e haftād o do mellat* (Berlin, 1924). (5) *Resāla-ye en šā' Allāh mā šā' Allāh*, a short pamphlet criticizing both Sunnite and Shi'ite 'ulamā' for their fruitless and pedantic scholarship. It was written in Istanbul in Raġab, 1310/January, 1893 as a refutation of a treatise by Ḥājj Moḥammad Karīm Kermānī, the leader of the Shaikhis; published (Ādamīyat, *Andīšahā*, p. 53). (6) Translation of Fénélon's *Télémaque*, not completed, unpublished. Āqā Khan's articles for *Aktar* appeared in a column entitled "Dar fann-e goftan o neveštan," which was contributed from vol. 15, no. 37 to vol. 16, no. 11. His *Dīvān* was published in lithograph edition by 'Abd-al-Ḥosayn Mīrzā Farmānfarmā (Tehran, n.d.). (7) *Se maktūb* and (8) *Şad kaṭāba*, two volumes on Iranian history and society following 19th-century European natural sciences



and socio-anthropological theories. They are written in the form of letters from a fictional Persian prince living in India, to another fictional prince in Persia; in spite of the titles, vol. I includes one letter, and vol. II, forty-two. *Se maktūb* is similar to Ākūndzāda's book of the same title (q.v.), though with major differences (see F. Ādamīyat "Se maktūb-e Mīrzā Fath-'Alī, se maktūb o šad kaṭāba-ye Mīrzā Āqā Khan," *Yağmā* 19, 1345 Š./1966, pp. 362-67, 425-28). This work is undated, but given the references to western writers and their ideas, it was probably written in Istanbul. E. G. Browne states that *Se maktūb* was written in 1280/1863-64 in an obvious confusion with Ākūndzāda's work; at that time, Mīrzā Āqā Khan was barely ten years old. (Selections published by M. Moḥīṭ Ṭabāṭabā'ī, "Ostāndārī-e Sūsmār-al-dawla," *Moḥīṭ* 2/9, 1326 Š./1947, pp. 18-22; 10, pp. 18-21; 11, pp. 20-22; 12, pp. 7-11; 13, pp. 18-19; 14, pp. 13-14, and R. Reżāzāda Malek, *Sūsmār-al-dawla*, pp. 125-29, 132-65). (9) *Takwīn wa tašrī'*, a philosophical essay, heavily influenced by western natural scientists and empirical theories. It is undated but the subject again suggests that it was written in Istanbul; unpublished. (10) *Tārīk-e šānžmān-e Īrān*, eighteen sheets of an unfinished critical essay on the impact of the Omayyad Caliphate and the coming of the Mongols. It was probably written in Trebizond (Ādamīyat, *Andīšahā*, p. 46); unpublished. (11) *Nāma-ye bāstān*, a verse epic relating the history of pre-Islamic Persia in imitation of Ferdowsī's *Šāh-nāma*. The last part contains an essay on literary criticism and a few patriotic poems. It was written and completed in Trebizond in 1313/1895; a second volume (*Sālār-nāma*) was added by a former classmate, Shaikh Aḥmad Adīb Kermānī, to relate the history of Islamic Iran. Both volumes were published under the second title (Shiraz, 1316/1898), without the last part of volume one; this was published by Nāẓem-al-eslām Kermānī in his *Tārīk-e bīdārī-e Īrānīān* (Tehran, 3 vols., 1324-32 Š./1945-53, I, pp. 177-88). (12) *Ketāb-e rayḥān*, his last work, written in Trebizond a few months before his death and not completed. It is essentially a critique of Persian literature in general and a call for a new genre of *littérature engagée*; unpublished. (13) *Tarjāma-ye 'ahd-nāma-ye Mālek Aštār* (Tehran, 1321/1903). A number of his works have been lost, probably due to the confiscation of his papers by the Ottomans at the time of his arrest. For a list and discussion of them see Ādamīyat (*Andīšahā*, pp. 37-57). He is also credited with assisting Mīrzā Ḥabīb Eṣfahānī, in whose house he lived for some two years, in his Persian translation of Morier's *Adventures of Hajji Baba of Isfahan*.



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