



ĀQĀ KHAN I. ĀQĀ KHAN I MAḤALLĀTĪ

Sayyed Ḥasan-ʿAlī Šāh Āqā Khan Maḥallātī (1219-1300/1804-81) was the last imam of the Nezārī Ismaʿilis to reside in Iran and the first to bear the title of Āqā Khan. He was born in the village of Kahak near Maḥallāt in central Iran, where his father, Shah Ḳalīlallāh, had transferred the seat of the imamate from Kermān in 1194/1780. Later, however, Shah Ḳalīlallāh moved to Yazd, in order to be closer to the main body of his followers in India, leaving his wife and son to live on the proceeds of the family holdings. Disputes among the local Ismaʿilis left them unprovided for, and they moved to Qom, where their situation turned out to be still more precarious. In 1233/1817, Shah Ḳalīlallāh was murdered in his residence at Yazd, as the result of an altercation in the bazaar between some Ismaʿilis and the townsfolk. His widow left Qom for the court in Tehran, where she successfully pleaded for justice. Not only were those responsible for the killing of Shah Ḳalīlallāh punished and family lands in the Maḥallāt region extended, but Ḥasan-ʿAlī Shah was given a daughter of Faṭḥ-ʿAlī Shah (r. 1212-50/1797-1834), Sarv-e Jahān Ḳānom in marriage, and appointed governor of Qom. (According to Aḥmad Mīrzā ʿAzod-al-dawla [*Tārīḳ-e ʿAzodī*, ed. ʿA. Navāʿī, Tehran, 2535 = 1355 Š./1977, pp. 21-22] the main reason was services of his father in the establishment of the Qajar dynasty.) It was as a result of this appointment that he acquired the title of Āqā Khan, subsequently the hereditary title of the Nezārī Ismaʿili imams. Ḥasan-ʿAlī Shah, the first Āqā Khan, apparently led a tranquil existence until the death of Faṭḥ-ʿAlī Shah in 1250/1834, and even acquired a personal military force, which



participated in quelling disturbances during the brief interregnum between Fath-ʿAlī Shah and his successor, Moḥammad Shah (r. 1250-64/1834-48).

The Āqā Khan traveled to Tehran to congratulate Moḥammad Shah on his accession, and was appointed by him governor of Kermān, a province containing many Ismaʿīlis that had once been governed by his grandfather, Abuʿl-Ḥasan Shah, on behalf of Karīm Khan Zand (r. 1163-93/1750-79). It was now infested with rebels, whom the Āqā Khan undertook to suppress without any advance payment, on the understanding that he should later recover his expenses from the revenue of the province. The task was completed within a year, but the Āqā Khan’s tenure of his governorship was shortlived. In 1252/1836 an army advanced on Kermān in order to replace him with Firūz Mīrzā, a Qajar prince.

His dismissal was probably occasioned by Sufi rivalries that had become interwoven with political intrigue. It appears that the Āqā Khan—like several of his ancestors and relatives—was an initiate of the Neʿmatallāhī order, owing his loyalty to Zayn-al-ʿābedīn Šīrvānī (Mast-ʿAlī Shah), whom he had once sheltered from persecution in an Ismaʿīli village near Maḥallāt. When another Neʿmatallāhī initiate, Ḥājjī Mīrzā Āqāšī, the grand vizier (*ṣadr-e aʿzam*) of Moḥammad Shah, sought to displace Zayn-al-ʿābedīn from his position of supremacy within the order, the Āqā Khan remained faithful to the claims of Zayn-al-ʿābedīn; Ḥājjī Mīrzā Āqāšī therefore avenged himself dismissing the Āqā Khan from the governorship of Kermān (see Masʿūd Mīrzā Zēll-al-soltān, *Tārīk-e Sargodāšt-e Masʿūdī*, Tehran, 1325/1907, pp. 197-98). A supplementary reason may have been the Āqā Khan’s refusal to give his daughter in marriage to the son of lowborn protégé of Ḥājjī Mīrzā Āqāšī, who had originally worked on the family lands at Maḥallāt (see Moḥammad b. Zayn-al-ʿābedīn Ḳorāsānī Fedāʿī, *Tārīk-e Esmāʿīliya*, ed. A. A. Semyonov, Moscow, 1959, repr. Tehran, 1362 Š./1983, p. 151). Finally, it is possible that the links between the Āqā Khan and the British, which became so obvious at a later date, existed already at this time, and the Iranian government may have felt it desirable to remove him from Kermān, a province dangerously close to India.

In any event, the Āqā Khan forcefully resisted his dismissal, as seems to have been anticipated. He withdrew with his forces to the citadel at Bam, but was obliged to surrender after a siege lasting fourteen months. There followed eight months of captivity in Kermān and a period of retreat at the shrine of Shah ʿAbd-al-ʿAzīm before he was given an audience at court to plead for mercy. Moḥammad Shah pardoned him on condition that he retire to the



family lands at Maḥallāt. The Āqā Khan stayed in Maḥallāt for about two years gathering an army comprising both Ismaʿilis and non-Ismaʿili mercenaries with a view to resuming his rebellion. In order to conceal his intentions, he sought permission to leave Iran and visit Mecca (an act which would have been highly atypical for an Ismaʿili imam). Permission was granted, and the Āqā Khan left Maḥallāt in Raġab, 1256/September, 1840. Instead of proceeding to Bandar ʿAbbās to embark for the Ḥeġāz, he made for Yazd, showing Bahman Mīrzā, the governor of that city, forged documents reinstating him in the governorship of Kermān (A. ʿA. Wazīrī, *Tārīk-e Kermān*, ed. M. E. Bāstānī Pārīsī, Tehran, 1340 Š./1961, p. 388). Bahman Mīrzā soon realized the papers were false, and a clash took place between his forces and those of the Āqā Khan in which the latter were victorious. After a few months at the village of Rūmanī near Šahr-e Bābak, the Āqā Khan moved westwards in the direction of Fārs, where he stayed until the spring of 1258/1842 (*Ebrat-afzā*, ed. Kūhī Kermānī, pp. 32-35). Then he set out once more in the direction of Kermān. He enjoyed a number of initial successes in fighting against government troops on the outskirts of the city, primarily because of the advantage given him by two cannons of British provenance (see letter of Ḥāġġī Mīrzā Āqāšī to the British Embassy in Ādamīyat, *Amīr-e kabīr*, p. 259). Ultimately, however, he was driven back from Kermān by a force of 24,000 men under the command of Faẓl-ʿAlī Khan Qarabāġī, and he decided to flee to India, possibly by previous arrangement with the British authorities (see *Ebrat-afzā*, pp. 48-54). The way to the coast was blocked, so he traversed the Dašt-e Lūṭ to Qāʿen and thence crossed into Afghanistan. Thus ended the Iranian period of the Nezārī Ismaʿili imamate.

Once inside Afghanistan, he advanced with his remaining followers—about a thousand in number—by way of Gerešk to Qandahār, which was then under British occupation. Major Rawlinson, the *taḥṣīldār*, assigned him a daily allowance of a hundred rupees, and anxious to be of service to those whom he calls in his memoirs “the people of God” (*ibid.*, p. 56), the Āqā Khan offered to conquer Herat on their behalf. The proposal was accepted, but soon all British plans in Afghanistan were nullified by the uprising of Moḥammad-Akbar Khan and the annihilation of the British garrison in Kabul. The Āqā Khan, however, still found occasion to be useful, by aiding General Nott to evacuate his forces from Qandahār and join up with a relief column coming from Sind (The Aga Khan, *Memoirs: World Enough and Time*, London, 1954, p. 21).

The Āqā Khan continued supplying mercenary services in Sind, where he



helped the British in implementing the “forward policy.” He not only placed his cavalry at their disposal but also put pressure on Nāṣer Khan, the ruler of Kalāt, to cede Karachi to the British, and when he proved obdurate, he betrayed his battle plans to the British (see *Ebrat-afzā*, p. 60; William Napier, *History of Sir Charles Napier’s Administration of Scinde*, London, 1851, p.75). For these and other services rendered in Sind, the Āqā Khan received an annual subvention of 2,000 pounds and the hereditary title of Highness.

Despite his increasing involvement with the British, the Āqā Khan seems initially to have hoped to return to Iran. Profiting from the British desire to subdue Baluchistan, he participated in the campaigns against various Baluchi chieftains and sent two of his brothers, Moḥammad-Bāqer Khan and Abu’l-Ḥasan Khan, across the border into Iranian Baluchistan to establish a bridgehead at Bampūr for the subsequent conquest of south-east Iran. Despite some early successes, the plan failed (see Ādamīyat, *Amīr-e kabīr*, p. 213).

In the meantime, the Āqā Khan had proceeded via Kuchh, Kathiawar, Junagarh, Surat and Daman to Bombay, visiting Isma‘ili communities en route. Soon after he arrived in Moḥarram, 1262/January, 1846, the Iranian government demanded his extradition, citing article fourteen of the Anglo-Iranian Treaty of 1299/1814. The British refused to comply, promising only to transfer the Āqā Khan to Calcutta. Even this measure was delayed, however, while the British made efforts to secure a pardon and honorable return to Iran for their protégé. When the Iranian government proved obdurate, the Āqā Khan was finally sent to Calcutta in April, 1847. There he remained until the death of Moḥammad Shah the following year, when, hoping for a show of leniency in the new reign he returned to Bombay and had the British make new efforts on his behalf. These, too, were unavailing, and after a final approach to the Iranian government in 1852, the Āqā Khan resigned himself to permanent residence in India.

The new place of residence was not without its benefits. Not only did the British continue their patronage (the Āqā Khan was the only Indian dignitary visited in his home by the Prince of Wales on his state visit to India), but also it became possible to organize the Isma‘ili community more tightly and profitably than had been possible at the remote and changing seats of the imamate in Iran. Isma‘ilis from places as distant as Badaḵṣhān had shown great resourcefulness in visiting their imam even during his campaigns and wanderings in south-east Iran, Afghanistan and Sind; now that he was settled in Bombay, the flow of tribute swelled to a flood, and in the words of one



Ismaʿili source, “the palaces of the Āqā Khan began to cover a large area of Bombay” (M. Ġāleb, *Alām al-Esmāʿīliya*, p. 217).

This position of reinforced power and prosperity was not won without a fight. Certain of the local Ismaʿilis (converts from Hinduism known as khojas) had been refusing the payment of their religious dues (the *das-sondh*, literally a tenth of the property of the faithful, but sometimes as much as an eighth) even before the Āqā Khan’s migration to India. In order to enforce the payments, he had sent his grandmother to Bombay, who—among other measures—instituted a suit against the dissidents in the Bombay High Court. The recusants, known as *barbhai*, because they were twelve in number, were excommunicated, but subsequently readmitted to the community after they had paid their arrears and performed acts of atonement. This by no means settled the matter, however, and a reformist party of khojas came into being, which formulated doctrinal as well as financial objections to the position of the Āqā Khan, denouncing in particular his claims to divinity. The Āqā Khan and his reformist opponents clashed in court in 1847, and three years later the conflict took a bloody turn with the murder of four reformists at the Bombay *jamāʿat-kāna*. The murderers were executed, and given a martyr’s burial under the personal supervision of the Āqā Khan. In order to secure a pledge of loyalty from the members of his community, the Āqā Khan circulated papers in 1862 summarizing the doctrine of the Nezārī Ismaʿili sect and requiring all in agreement to sign. Matters finally came to a head in 1866 when dissenting khojas filed a suit in Bombay against the Āqā Khan demanding that an accounting be made of all communal property; that the property be held in trust for charitable, religious and public uses; that the religious officials of the community (*mokīs* and *kamadīyas*) be elected; and that the Āqā Khan refrain from interfering in the management of communal property, appointing *mokīs* and *kamadīyas*, and charging fees for discharging the functions of the imamate. After a hearing lasting twenty-five days, in the course of which the Āqā Khan himself testified, Justice Joseph Arnould gave a long and detailed judgement, finding against the plaintiffs and for the Āqā Khan in all points (for the text of the judgement, see A. S. Picklay, *History of the Ismailis*, Bombay, 1940, pp. 113-70). Probably the most important effect of this ruling was to place, for the first time, all the community property of the Nezārī Ismaʿilis in the name of the Āqā Khan and under his absolute control; the legal basis for the vast fortune of his heirs was thus laid.

Āqā Khan Maḥallātī died in April, 1881, and was buried in a lavish shrine at



Ḥasanābād in the Mazagon area of Bombay. He was succeeded by the eldest of his four sons, Āqā ‘Alī Šāh, [Āqā Khan II](#).

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A Gujarati translation appeared soon after its first publication. According to W. Ivanow (*Ismaili Literature: A Bibliographical Survey*, Tehran, 1963, pp. 148-49), the *Tārīk-e‘ebrat-afza* was written on behalf of the Āqā Khan by Mīrzā Aḥmad Weqār Šīrāzī, son of the celebrated poet Weṣāl, but he cites no evidence beyond the fact that Weqār visited Bombay in 1266/1850.

Contrary to what, Ivanow implies, the account of Weqār in Ma‘šūm-‘Alī Šāh’s *Ṭarā‘eq al-ḥaqā‘eq* (ed. M. J. Maḥjūb, Tehran, 1345 Š./1965, III, pp. 372-73) does not mention any ties between Weqār and the Āqā Khan.

According to Moḥammad Fedā‘ī, (*Tārīk-e Esmā‘īliya*, p. 154) the Āqā Khan wrote a book called *Bahrām o Nīmrūz*, describing the circumstances of his departure from Iran; it is not clear whether this is the same book as *‘Ebrat-afzā*. Fedā‘ī also devotes some thirty pages (pp. 146-76) to the miracles the Āqā Khan allegedly performed from infancy to death.

See also H. Algar, “The Revolt of Āghā Khān Maḥallātī and the Transference of the Ismā‘īlī Imamate to India,” *Stud. Isl.* 29, 1969, pp. 55-81 (includes references to all relevant Persian chronicles).

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