Published: December 15, 1986
Last Updated: February 3, 2017

ĀQĀSĪ

ĀQĀSĪ, ḤĀJJĪ MĪRZĀ ABBĀS ĪRAVĀNĪ (ca. 1198-1265/1783-1848), grand vizier of Moḥammad Shah Qāǰār (r. 1250-64/1834-48) between 1251-64/1835-48. Son of Moslem b. ʿAbbās, a petty Mulla-landowner of Īravān (Yerevan) from the Bayāt clan; when still a youth he accompanied his father to the Shiʿite holy cities of Iraq where he studied for a number of years under the Neʿmatallāhī Sufi teacher Mollā ʿAbd-al-Ṣamad of Hamadān. During the Wahhābī sack of Karbalā (Ḏu'l-ḥeǰǰa, 1216/March, 1802) Mollā ʿAbd-al-Ṣamad was killed but ʿAbbās rescued his teacher's family and accompanied them to Hamadān. For some time, he led the life of a wandering dervish and went on a pilgrimage to Mecca before settling down in his home town, apparently as a clerk to the Armenian patriarch of Īravān. Later he moved to Tabrīz, then a refuge for the Neʿmatallāhīs, and entered the service of ʿAbbās Mīrzā's minister, the Sufi patron Mīrzā Bozorg (ʿĪsā) Qāʾem-maqām Farāhānī.

Mīrzā Bozorg encouraged the dervish ʿAbbās to adopt a mulla's attire and gave him the tutorship of his son Mūsā, a half brother of the famous Mīrzā Abu'l-Qāsem Qāʾem-maqām. In the service of Mīrzā Bozorg, he rose in rank and even received some *toyūl*s around Tabrīz and the title Āqāsī (as is seen from his seal "Āqāsī 1237") but the death of his patron in 1237/1821 endangered his rank and possessions. The rivalry between Qāʾem-maqām's sons, Mūsā and Abu'l-Qāsem brought to the surface the deep-rooted Turko-Persian factionalism in Tabrīz, forcing Mollā ʿAbbās, himself of Turkish descent with strong links with the Turko-Kurdish Bayāt chiefs of Mākū, to take refuge from the triumphant Abu'l-Qāsem with the powerful chief of Ḵoy, Amīr Khan Sardār. Through the

latter's mediation, Āqāsī was readmitted to the Crown Prince's service, and by 1240/1824 was appointed chief tutor to several of the Crown Prince's sons, including Farīdūn Mīrzā and, soon after, Moḥammad Mīrzā, the future shah.

Āqāsī's growing influence upon Moḥammad Mīrzā and other princes enhanced his position in spite of Qāʾem-maqām's acid criticism of his eccentric personality and teaching method. His moral instructions, a peculiar mixture of popular mystical dictums and ascetic abstinence, and his claims of divination and foresight (he often reassured the wishful Moḥammad Mīrzā of his eventual succession) made Āqāsī in the eyes of his pupils a "source of grace" and the perfect master. His word even seems to have had some effect on ʿAbbās Mīrzā. Having some vested interest in Īravān, Āqāsī's pro-*ǰehād* tendencies probably contributed to the warlike attitude of the Tabrīz court just before the second round of Russo-Persian wars (1826-28). To Qāʾem-maqām's disappointment, defeat in the war did not reduce Āqāsī's influence and his intimacy with Moḥammad Mīrzā. Moreover, the concentration of Īravānī war refugees in Mākū seems to have strengthened Āqāsī's hand.

Upon Moḥammad Shah's accession in Rabīʿa I, 1250/November, 1834, which he regarded as the realization of his tutor's prognostications, Qāʾem-maqām assumed premiership, and this in effect guaranteed the consolidation of the throne through a troubled period of transition and in the face of fierce competition. However, less than a year later, Moḥammad Shah, lured by the anti-Qāʾem-maqām coalition led by Āqāsī, felt confident enough to eliminate the highly independent vizier (Ṣafar, 1251/June, 1835) and shortly after appoint in his place his own confidant and spiritual guide.

Āqāsī started as a caretaker premier but soon proved to be shrewd enough to outmaneuver other contestants to the office including the powerful Amīr-e Neẓām of Azarbaijan, Moḥammad Khan Zangena, the Shah's grand uncle Allāhyār Khan Āṣaf-al-dawla, and the Neʿmatallāhī leader Zayn-al-ʿābedīn Šīrvānī. Āqāsī's rise to premiership and his survival in that office for thirteen years was primarily due to the Shah's attachment and unconditional trust in Āqāsī but also to Moḥammad Shah's compliance with the early Qajar policy of employing weak ministers with no independent political base. Āqāsī turned this weakness into an advantage. He saw the key to his survival in maintaining a low profile and a facade of temporality and resignation, and through emotional pressure on his sole disciple, the Shah, to relieve him from government service, yet indispensable as it was, the Shah's dependence on Āqāsī's paternal care was not sufficient to keep Āqāsī's adversaries at bay.

Referring to himself as *Šaḵṣ-e awwal* (literally, the first person or premier, as he was addressed by European envoys upon his refusal to adopt the usual title *Ṣadr-e aʿẓam*), he was careful to enhance the Shah's image as Divine Viceregent (*Walī-allāh*) while building up his own power base within the bureaucracy, the court and the army.

In a widespread purge in 1251/1835-36, Āqāsī eradicated all pro-Qāʾem-maqām elements and replaced them with predominantly Azarbaijani allies. His long-desired marriage to the Shah's aunt, ʿEzzat-al-nesāʾ, the boisterous daughter of Fatḥ-ʿAlī Shah (he first proposed to and was contemptuously rejected by her on the way to his second Mecca pilgrimage in 1246/1831) as well as the arranged union between his close aid Mīrzā Masʿūd Khan Gamrūdī (Anṣārī) and the influential Żīāʾ-al-salṭana, increased his control over the remnants of the last Shah's harem. Senior provincial governorships also went to those brothers of the Shah (such as Farīdūn Mīrzā) who had proven their loyalty to the minister. The monopoly of the Nūrī family over the army administration was also weakened. Yet with all these efforts, Āqāsī's control of the government machinery remained precarious and often challenged by prominent rivals within the Qajar ruling elite. The equilibrium that was eventually achieved after 1837 left powerful figures in control of crucial posts and in the following years frequent attempts to oust the unpopular minister contributed to the atmosphere of instability and intrigue characteristic of Moḥammad Shah's period.

The Herat campaign of 1252-53/1837-38, the first major test of Āqāsī's competence, demonstrated the failure of his self-styled army modernization, irresolute diplomacy versus the Afghan chief Kāmrān Mīrzā and the British envoy McNeill, and poor command over an army paralyzed by starvation, factionalism, and unclear military objectives. The premier's scheme for a partial siege of the city to facilitate the inhabitants' flight in order to decimate the enemy's strength, was an unconventional tactic with doubtful merits. Poor logistics, low morale, long delays, and capacious demands made by the officials, however, furnished the British with the opportunity to dictate their pro-Afghan policy and force upon the Shah a humiliating retreat. The Herat episode with its subsequent break in Anglo-Persian relations was the first serious confrontation with the British which in effect made them no less aggressive than the Russians when it came to reducing Iran to a weak buffet state. To this end their envoys' capricious behavior, rivalries, and imperial arrogance more than their cannons and gunboats served to humble the

embittered Shah and his minister.

Faced with a barrage of demands, Āqāsī's manner, which largely grew out of despair, was a combination of subdued tolerance, flattery, and sarcasm. The spirit of his foreign policy, however, hardly deviated from what had been laid down by his predecessors; to secure Iran's integrity and the survival of the Qajars, it was understood that the greatest degree of peaceful resistance should be displayed towards European powers while every measure was taken to maintain a tolerable level of rivalry between them in the hope of modifying their future territorial and other demands. To this policy of compliance, Āqāsī added reluctance to open up Iran's markets to European capital and products and skepticism towards the outcome of Western style reforms and modernization. On both these accounts, though he failed to achieve any enduring results, Āqāsī's record was better than his reputation.

The Anglo-Persian treaty of 1841, a long-resisted amendment to the 1814 treaty and the ultimate price for resuming friendly relations with Britain after Herat, demonstrated further setbacks. The minister was forced to compromise on consular representation and growth in the volume of foreign imports in order to end the British occupation of and secure Iran's sovereignty over Ḵārg island. Moreover, Āqāsī's further protests against Britain's open disregard for Iran's claims over Bahrain in early 1840, was not wholly ineffective in deterring the British from similar ambitions towards Iran's more vital possessions in the Persian Gulf.

Russian stipulations, chiefly based on article seven of the treaty of Torkamāṇčāy (1826), which granted the Russians the exclusive rights of navigation in the Caspian, received a more lenient treatment from Āqāsī. After lengthy diplomatic disputes, demands for navigation in the Anzalī lagoon and a naval base on the island of Āšūrāda off the Astarābād coast were eventually met, when the rising tension and forced occupation of the island (1260/1844) obliged Āqāsī to give up for fear of severe military repercussions. This gave rise to the British allegations concerning Āqāsī's pro-Russian attitude and the later myth about his political ignorance and disregard for Iran's interests in the Caspian. Caught in the middle of the imperial game of territorial acquisitions, he had little choice but to sacrifice the periphery in the hope of saving the center. Āqāsī's foreign policy, with its haphazardness, compromises, and contradictions, could hardly be defended. Yet facing foreign aggression, particularly after Torkamāṇčāy and Herat, the hope of implementing a more consistent and independent policy seemed inconceivable.

To remedy the increasing foreign pressure, the premier's approach to alternative powers proved to be of no avail. Lukewarm negotiations with Moḥammad-ʿAlī of Egypt in response to the latter's earlier proposal for the formation of an anti-Russian league was eventually abandoned after Moḥammad-ʿAlī's retreat from Syria (1840) presumably for fear of Russian retaliation. Bearing in mind the joint action of the European powers against Egypt, he cautiously turned to France in search of a less vulnerable ally. The French mission under Comte de Sercey (1839-40) was partially frustrated when France could not convince Āqāsī to sign a commercial treaty. In the neighboring Arab Iraq, the massacre of Karbalā by Ottoman troops (1259/1843) stirred a popular call for revenge and only helped to deteriorate Perso-Ottoman relations already belligerent over Moḥammara and disputes on western frontiers. Āqāsī, unwilling to retaliate, tried to appease the *ʿolamāʾ* and the public by voicing largely futile protests to the Porte. The Erzurum conference (1843-47), however, was a partial victory since not only Iran's sovereignty over Moḥammara and the safety of Persian pilgrims to Iraq were guaranteed, the treaty also stood as a reassuring sign of Anglo-Russian respect for Iran's territorial integrity.

The cornerstone of Āqāsī's domestic policy after the 1835-36 power struggle, was to sustain a degree of control over the ailing monarch both by reducing direct access to him and by drawing his attention to real or imaginary perils to his throne. By late 1830, his own protégés and supporters were in partial control and the much hated corps of Īravānī émigrés (the Mākūʾī *fawj*) with personal loyalty to Āqāsī, served as a private army to hold his sway over the capital. Wherever possible, other officers of Azarbaijani and Kurdish origins were appointed to provincial posts. Yet all these measures failed to precipitate the flow of the badly needed revenue from the provinces still under his opponents' control: Moʿtamed-al-dawla in Fārs and then Isfahan; Āṣaf-al-dawla and Sālār in Khorasan; and Bahman Mīrzā in Azarbaijan.

To compensate for the loss of revenue and the subsequent financial crises, the minister (perhaps inspired by Moḥammad-ʿAlī's agrarian policy) resorted to the highly unpopular policy of repossessing the *toyūl*s granted in Fatḥ-ʿAlī Shah's reign. Widespread confiscation of land, sometimes even private property, especially in the vicinity of the capital, further weakened the power of the purged civil servants and officials and allowed Āqāsī not only to pay his troops and finance other projects but to secure the highly sensitive supply of grains to the capital as well. By advocating highly partisan interpretation of

jurisprudic injunctions, he reclaimed from the *toyūldār*s a large number of villages. Towards the end of his premiership, in one transaction he transferred to the crown the ownership of no less than 1,438 villages with a total value of one million tomans.

To raise additional revenue (and perhaps in conjunction with the Neʿmatallāhī principle of return to the land) the premier attempted to expand the cultivated land and improve the irrigation system, showing a keen interest in the construction of new *qanāt*s and water canals. Though not always successful, these projects seem to have increased the agricultural output and possibly even reduced the unemployment in the cities by diverting idle work force from the declining handicraft industries to government financed projects. A few villages were revived and repopulated around Tehran and a number of construction projects were carried out, including the Karaǰ irrigation canal (to reduce water shortages in the capital), commercial quarters and warehouses in the Tehran bazaar and elsewhere, frontier fortresses, tombs of Sufi saints, and garden palaces in northern Tehran. To reduce the soaring deficit, steps were taken in conjunction with earlier attempts under Fatḥ-ʿAlī Shah, to restrain the import of foreign clothes by encouraging the consumption of domestic fabrics in the court, army, and government. This, however, did not save the local industries from ruin, and in spite of frequent protests by the guilds, Āqāsī's government could not withstand European commercial pressure.

More extensive, but unsystematic efforts were made after the Herat defeat of 1838 in the domain of rearmament, mostly in the spirit of the *neẓām-e ǰadīd* reforms initiated by ʿAbbās Mīrzā. With little European assistance, new foundries were built in major cities, and large artillery was created to include field guns and siege cannons. Technologically obsolete and unreliable, the large arsenal built up in his period included improvised iron shoes for camels and other military implements which are telling examples of the Qajar makeshift technology. Mīrzā Moḥammad-Reżā Tabrīzī (Mohandes-bāšī), one of the earliest Western-educated military engineers, was commissioned to apply modern technology to Āqāsī's improvisations on weapons and warfare. The result was a military manual entitled *Ṣawāʿeq al-neẓām*. To answer Iran's urgent scientific and technological needs, attempts were made to dispatch a second group of students abroad. Negotiations with Moḥammad-ʿAlī came nowhere. Later, in response to Āqāsī's request for technical aids, the French government agreed to train Persian students, and a group of students was

dispatched to France in the early 1840s, of whom little is known. Earlier, under Āqāsī's auspices, Mīrzā Ṣāleḥ Šīrāzī, also educated in Europe, published the first Persian newspaper, *Kāḡaz-e aḵbār*, in 1253/1837.

In spite of their novelty and positive contribution none of these measures relieved the government of its administrative and financial constraints. The central treasury's shortage of revenue meant an increasing budget deficit, which by 1264/1848 amounted to about one million tomans. By the middle of the 1840s, weak management and Āqāsī's notorious lack of discipline and ignorance of fiscal affairs (he was the only minister in the nineteenth century with no previous experience in administration) brought the central government to the verge of financial bankruptcy. The chaotic administration, aggravated by corrupt practices, sale of offices, and inability to balance the budget, regulate taxes, and collect arrears plunged the government into further crises. Moreover, misappropriation of state funds and increasing unpopularity owing to insecurity and extortion reduced the effectiveness of casual improvements and neutralized whatever positive reforms were undertaken by his administration, to the extent that a contemporary satirist, could say: "Not a farthing did Ḥājjī (Āqāsī) leave in the Shah's coffers; all was spent on guns and the irrigation of *qanāt*s. Neither did the friend's crop see a drop of that water, nor was the enemy bothered by that gun" (cited in ʿAbbās Mīrzā Molkārā, *Šarḥ-e ḥāl*, p. 83).

Sudden deterioration of the Shah's health around 1261/1845 started off a new wave of opposition and power struggle and in turn persuaded Āqāsī to take his own precautions in the event of the monarch's death. Emboldening the frivolous ambitions of his half mad stepson Allāh-qolī Khan Īl-ḵānī, a grandson of Fatḥ-ʿAlī Shah, he used the former's recurring insubordination as a pretext to defame his opponents and charge them with treason and collaboration. After the Shah's partial recovery, Malek-Qāsem Mīrzā, an enlightened uncle of the Shah and an ally of Manūčehr Khan Moʿtamed-al-dawla was accused of conspiracy and banished from the capital. Also, Āqā Khan Nūrī was exiled to Kāšān. Shortly after, the Shah's great uncle, then trustee of the Shrine of Imam Reżā in Mašhad, Allāhyār Khan Āṣaf-al-dawla, an arch enemy of Āqāsī, was reproached and exiled to Iraq. But in 1262/1846 the governor general of Ḵorāsān, Moḥammad-Ḥasan Khan Sālār, son of Āṣaf-al-dawla (later in tacit collaboration with the Shah's brother Bahman Mīrzā), the acting governor of Azarbaijan, defied the authority of the central government and thus instituted the Ḵorāsān revolt (1841-50). After an abortive attempt in 1847 Bahman Mīrzā

took refuge in Russia leaving Azarbaijan under Āqāsī's control. These partial successes for Āqāsī, however, did not eliminate the sources of the discontent and in effect turned the final years of Moḥammad Shah into a state of turbulence.

Claims of Sayyed ʿAlī-Moḥammad Šīrāzī, the Bāb, and the rapid growth of the Bābī movements between 1844 and 1846 (1260-62) was first dismissed by Āqāsī as a trivial blasphemy but in 1262/1846 when the governor of Isfahan, Manūčehr Khan, impressed by the Bāb's claims, offered him his protection and hospitality, the premier began to see the potentials of a dangerous alliance. His anxieties subsided, however, with the death of Manūčehr Khan in 1263/1847 and the taking of the Bāb into his own custody. Faced with the even grimmer prospects of the Shah's sympathetic curiosity towards the new prophet, he highlighted the *ʿolamā'*s strong condemnation in order to reverse the royal summons and instead incarcerate the Bāb first in his own home territory Mākū (1263-64/1847-48) and later in the impregnable fortress of Čahrīq close to the Turkish border. The Tabrīz examination of Šaʿbān, 1264/July, 1848 was in part designed by Āqāsī to stigmatize the Bābī cause while reminding his old adversaries, the *ʿolamā'*, of their precarious dependence on his good will. In spite of the *ʿolamā'*s anti-Bābī pledge and tacit criticism of the government's indecisive course—often exasperated by the minister's indulgence in anti-clerical utterances—and in spite of Āqāsī's own concern with the Bābīs' rising militancy, he was unwilling to take any drastic action fearing that in the circumstances of the Shah's serious illness and the prospects of Sālār's revolt, a Bābī uprising might jeopardize the very survival of the Qajar throne. His relative leniency towards the Bābīs was also in harmony with his general policy of restraining the *ʿolamā'*s authority. Other measures, including banishing and putting under house arrest troublesome *ʿolamā'*, cutting or reducing pensions and appointing pro-government clergies with Sufi leaning to sensitive religious posts, to some extent weakened the *ʿolamā'*s base and facilitated the growth of anti-clerical tendencies. Such measures, however, did not result in any noticeable upsurge in the popularity of the Sufi orders, but perhaps contributed to other religio-political uprisings such as the abortive revolt of the Ismaʿili leader Āqā Khan Maḥallātī (Ḥosayn-ʿAlī Shah) in Kermān (1258-60/1842-44) and the transfer of his seat to India.

The death of Moḥammad Shah in Šawwāl, 1264/September, 1848 deprived the premier of his chief source of support. The anti-Āqāsī elements in the government, and the court, with the blessing of Jahān Ḵānom Mahd-e ʿOlyā,

mother of the new Shah, Nāṣer-al-dīn, soon forced the minister out of office. His alleged ambition to bring to the throne Moḥammad Shah's other son ʿAbbās Mīrzā Molkārā, if at all true, seems to be the last resort open to the desperate premier to negotiate a deal at a time when his Mākūʾī troops were being beaten in the streets of the capital. Dejected and fearful, he fled to the shrine of ʿAbd-al-ʿAẓīm and after receiving a safe conduct through the good offices of the Russian and British envoys, eventually took refuge in Iraq's holy cities, where he died a year later in Ramażān, 1265/1849.

Āqāsī is often portrayed both by his contemporaries and in modern accounts as an incompetent rascal with a career blistered by sheer ignorance and political blunders. Unfortunate in being placed chronologically in between two statesmen of great reputations, Qāʾem-maqām and Amīr Kabīr, his own personal weaknesses helped to highlight this negative image. He is often blamed for losses and failures out of proportion with the capability of any statesman in a position similar to his, when foreign aggression, domestic turbulence, public discontent and court intrigues left little room for more noble aspirations. Yet, Āqāsī's erratic behavior combined with Moḥammad Shah's moral dependency was sorely ineffective in preserving a rapidly declining and vulnerable state.

Āqāsī's improvised and highly personal Sufism, apparent in his short treatise, charged him with the contradictory spirits of self-aggrandizement and sheer humility. The former is reflected in his presumptuous behavior and crude arrogance towards inferiors, self-assumed military ingenuity, fantasies of being able to defeat European powers, and implicit claims of super-natural feats; the latter aspect was more frequently expressed in unwarranted, at times slavish flattery towards European envoys, ostentatious world renunciation, and self-mockery. Instances of such behavior were often scrupulously recorded by embittered court chroniclers, scornful ex-officials, and offended European visitors, who criticized him for his impertinence, unpredictable rage, disregard for protocol, foul language, clownish appearance and eccentric life style. Secret admiration for his stepson's debauchery, and suspected symptoms of suppressed homosexuality further tarnished his personal image in a society careful to maintain a facade of morality and solemn conduct (see, e.g., Mostawfī, *Šarḥ-e zendagānī* I, p. 412; *Dostūr al-aʿqāb*, apud Sāsānī, *Sīāsatgarān* II, pp. 79, 81).

Perhaps a more admirable quality was Āqāsī's relative tolerance and impunity towards his adversaries once he was assured of their harmlessness. Though a

mixed blessing by the standards of Qajar justice, the relative paucity of torture, executions, and other brutal punishments at his time was in part due to his personal sensitivity but also to the pragmatic considerations of a weak government. The same pragmatism made him realize in his own peculiar way his government's limited resources and fragile structure vis-à-vis domestic enemies and foreign adversaries.

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