



BABISM

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History, and Personal Experiences among Them. II. Their Literature And Doctrines,” *JRAS* 21, 1889, pp. 485-526, 881-1009; article “Bāb, Bābīs” in J. Hastings, ed., *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, and his notes to *A Traveller’s Narrative Written to Illustrate the Episode of the Báb* (by ‘Abbās Effendi), 2 vols., Cambridge, 1891; *Tārīkh-i-Jadīd or New History of Mirzá ‘Alī Muḥammed the Báb* (by Mīrzā Ḥosayn Hamadānī), Cambridge, 1893; and the *Kitāb-i-Nuqtatu’l-Kāf* (attributed to Ḥājji Mīrzā Jānī Kāšānī), London, 1910.

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(D. M. MacEoin)

ii. Babi Executions and Uprisings

In the 1840s and 1850s a series of violent incidents involving members of the Babi sect (see [babism](#)) and Shi’ites took place in Iran, the most serious of which were four military encounters at Shaikh Ṭabarsī in Māzandarān, Zanjān, and Neyrīz (twice). At the inception of the Babi movement in 1260/1844, an uprising (*korūj*) against unbelievers was keenly anticipated; it was at first believed that this event would begin in 1261/1845 in Karbalā’, when the Hidden Imam would appear to lead the *jehād* in person. The Bāb’s earliest major work, the *Qayyūm al-asmā’*, contains detailed regulations governing the conduct of *jehād* (*Qayyūm al-asmā’*, *sūras* 96-101; see MacEoin, “Holy War,” pp. 101-09). Up to 1264/1848, the sect’s *jehād* doctrine was essentially that of orthodox Shi’ism, but after that date, with the Bāb’s assumption of the role of Mahdī, a new legal system was promulgated in the Persian *Bayān* and other works. It appears that the entire Shi’ite population of Iran was now regarded as subject to *jehād*: non-Babis were to be forbidden to live in any of the five



central provinces of Fārs, Iraq, Azarbaijan, Khorasan, and Māzandarān. More broadly, Babi law called for the destruction of the shrines and holy places of previous religions and, as one later Bahai source puts it, “the universal slaughter of all save those who believed and were faithful” (‘Abbās Effendi, *Makātīb ‘Abd-al-Bahā’* II, Cairo, 1330/1912, p. 266).

From 1844 to 1848, tension between Babis and the rest of the population increased rapidly through several key incidents: the arrest and trial in Baghdad of the Bāb’s emissary, [Mollā ‘Alī Beṣṭāmī](#) in 1260/1844-45; the arrest and punishment of three Babis in Shiraz in 1261/1845; the arrest of the Bāb on his return from the *ḥajj* in the same year; several challenges to *mobāhala* (mutual imprecation) issued by the Bāb and his followers to ‘*olamā*’ in Iraq and Iran in 1262/1846 and 1263/1847; attacks on individual Babis in Hamadān, Qazvīn, Karbalā’, and Kermānšāh during the same period; and attacks on Babi merchants and ‘*olamā*’ in Qazvīn in 1263/1847, leading to the assassination by three Babis of [Mollā Moḥammad-Taqī Baraḡānī](#) in October of that year. (For details of these incidents, see MacEoin, “Holy War,” pp. 109-12).

Several sources indicate that Babis in different centers were collecting and manufacturing arms in readiness for the postponed *korūj* on the imam’s appearance (ibid., pp. 111-12; Māzandarānī, *Ḥohūr al-ḥaqq*, p. 374). The first serious incidents occurred in 1264/1848 in Mašhad, where armed members of the large Babi community clashed on two occasions with local soldiery. Expelled from Mašhad in Ša’bān, 1264/July, 1848, a party of Babis under the leadership of [Mollā Moḥammad-Ḥosayn Bošrū’ī](#) headed into Māzandarān and in October of that year established themselves near Bārforūšī at the shrine of Shaikh Abū ‘Alī al-Faẓl Ṭabarsī, which they fortified. From an original total of about 300, the number of insurgents rose to between 540 and 600 (Momen, “Social Basis,” pp. 161-65, esp. table 4). Leadership of the fort was in the hands of Bošrū’ī and another of the Bāb’s original disciples, [Mollā Moḥammad-‘Alī Bārforūšī Qoddūs](#). Between 14 Du’l-qa’da 1264/13 October 1848 and 16 Jomādā II 1265/9 May 1849, the Babi defenders and state troops under the overall command of Maḥdīqolī Mīrzā engaged in sporadic fighting, with heavy losses of life on both sides. The siege was finally ended by a ruse and the surviving Babis either executed or taken prisoner.

Following disturbances in Yazd, a prominent Babi ‘*ālem* (scholar) named [Sayed Yaḥyā Dārābī Waḥīd](#) moved to Neyrīz in Rajab, 1266/May, 1850; on his arrival he preached to large crowds and soon converted (or at least gained the support of) a sizeable part of the population of the Čenārsūkta quarter.



Existing tensions between the populace and the governor, Zayn-al-‘Ābedīn Khan, seem to have been reformulated and exacerbated by Dārābī, who was regarded by his followers as an independent authority in the town. Fighting soon broke out, whereupon around 1,000 Babis occupied the fort of K̄vāja outside Neyrīz, where they were besieged by troops sent by **Firūz Mīrzā Noṣrat-al-Dawla**, the governor of Fārs. Hostilities continued until the capture of the fort by treachery in Ša‘bān/June; about 500 Babis were killed during the fighting and in the executions that followed.

The Zanjān episode of 1266-67/1850-51 was the most protracted and involved the largest numbers, with the town almost equally divided between the Babis and their opponents. The former, numbering over 2,000, were led by Mollā Moḥammad-‘Alī Zanjānī Ḥojjat-al-Eslām (q.v.), a former Akbārī *‘alem* who had already been the center of religious controversy before his conversion and who seems to have advocated radical social changes. In the course of heavy fighting between the Babis and several contingents of state troops, from 1,000 to 1,800 Babis lost their lives and parts of the town were badly damaged.

Following the assassination by Babis of the governor of Neyrīz Ḥājī Zayn-al-‘Ābedīn Khan, early in 1269/1853, fighting continued for several months in the mountains outside the town, resulting in the deaths of some 350 Babis.

In addition to these outbreaks of large-scale violence, other incidents involving Babis occurred between 1850 and 1853: on 19 or 20 February 1850, seven Babis of relatively high social status were executed in Tehran; on 27 or 28 Ša‘bān 1266/8 or 9 July 1850, the Bāb himself was publicly shot with one companion in Tabrīz; in Du‘l-qa‘da, 1268/August-September, 1852, some 37 Babis, including leading figures such as Qorrat-al-‘Ayn Ṭāhera (q.v.), Mollā Shaikh ‘Alī Toršīzī, and Sayyed Ḥosayn Yazdī were executed in reprisal for the Babi attempt on the life of Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah on 28, Šawwāl/15, August; at the same period, there were further attacks on Babis in Mīlān near Tabrīz, Tākor in Māzandarān, Yazd, Neyrīz, and possibly elsewhere.

In all, something like 3,000 Babis died in these episodes, or, if we take the lower figure of 1,000 deaths at Zanjān, just over 2,000 in all. Later estimates of 20,000 and more found in some Bahai works do not, in fact, correspond to the more detailed figures given in Bahai historical sources. Similarly, the very high figures for both participants and casualties given in state chronicles like the *Nāseḳ al-tawārīḳ* are manifestly exaggerated, probably in order to explain away the failure of the government forces to put down the disturbances



rapidly.

It is impossible to identify a consistent pattern in these events. Ivanov's (1939) Marxist analysis shows serious limitations in its treatment of motives and its portrayal of the Babi participants in the struggles as "peasants, artisans, urban poor, and small trades-people." More recent studies by Momen (1983), Smith (1982), and MacEoin (1982) reveal a more complex interplay of social, political, and religious factors at work. The Shaikh Ṭabarsī siege was the most markedly religious of the larger incidents, while the Zanjān and Neyrīz uprisings were more closely linked to local politics. It is arguable that, whereas those involved in the Shaikh Ṭabarsī struggle and in the smaller pogroms were convinced Babis, many of those who participated in the fighting at Zanjān, Yazd, or Neyrīz may have been vague about or indifferent to the specific religious issues propounded by the Babi leadership. At Shaikh Ṭabarsī, messianic ambitions were linked to a belief that, through martyrdom, the defenders were reenacting the events of Karbalā'; the Qajar state and its forces were condemned as illegitimate and a defensive *jehād* proclaimed against them. At Zanjān, religious millenarianism was less marked, while puritan and egalitarian ideals were clearly in evidence.

Smallness of numbers, a limited social base, lack of a centralized or coordinated leadership, the absence of an agreed policy, and conflicts of motive all combined to rob the Babi uprisings of any potential they might otherwise have had of acting as catalysts for a broader movement for social, religious, or political change. Conversely, the military defeat of Babism all but stopped it in its tracks and forced the surviving leaders to reinterpret the religion and restate its goals, leading to the eventual emergence of [Azalī Babism](#) and [Bahāism](#). In the latter case, rejection of Babi militancy and the adoption of a pacifist orientation resulted initially in an emphasis on the absolute distinctiveness of the two movements; but as later doctrinal developments demanded increasing conflation of Babism and Bahāism, the Babi uprisings themselves were reinterpreted as defensive reactions to persecution by church and state (see, in particular, MacEoin, "From Babism to Baha'ism").

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Survey of Source Materials (forthcoming).