



## BĀLĀSARĪ

**BĀLĀSARĪ**, term popularly used to distinguish ordinary Shi'ites from members of the Shaikhi sect. The distinction is sometimes expressed by the alternative formulae of "Shaikhi/Motašarre'" and "Shaikhi/Oṣūlī," the latter example implying a continuity between Aḵbārī Shi'ism and [Shaikhism](#). The Shaikhi school itself was also known in the early period by the name "Kašfiya" in reference to the principle of *kašf* or the revelation of knowledge by supernatural means (Raštī, *Dalīl*, p. 9; cf. Čahārdehī, *Šaykīgarī*, pp. 51-52). The term "Bālāsari'" was applied to other Shi'ites by the Shaikhis on the grounds that, when in the shrine of the Imam Ḥosayn at Karbalā', the former advanced to a position above the head of the imam in order to pray, whereas the Shaikhis, in imitation of their founder, Shaikh Aḥmad Aḥsā'ī (d. 1241/1826; q.v.), remained below the head out of respect for the imam (Kermānī, *Hedāyat*, p. 83; Zarandī, *Dawn-Breakers*, pp. 84-85).

Disputes between Shaikhis and Bālāsari' began with the excommunication (*takfīr*) of Aḥsā'ī by [Mollā Moḥammad-Taqī Baraḡānī](#) and other 'ulamā' around 1238/1822 and intensified during the leadership of Aḥsā'ī's successor, Sayyed Kāzem Raštī (d. 1259/1844; q.v.; see MacEoin, *From Shaykhism*, pp. 75-81, 105-15). Both Aḥsā'ī and Raštī insisted on the essential orthodoxy of their teaching, a position which was maintained by the two main branches of the school after Raštī's death, those of Azarbaijan and Kermān. Broadly expressed, the Shaikhi position was that differences between them and their Bālāsari' opponents lay in the area of subsidiary religious matters (*forū*) rather than basic principles (*oṣūl*) or that the two groups were divided by temperament



(*mašrab*) rather than religion (*madhab*) (Kermānī, *Hedāyat*; Jalālī, *Šaykīya*, p. 126). Shaikhi ‘*olamā*’ often held important posts within the religious establishment, and it was not always easy or useful to draw clear lines between them and other Shi‘ites.

In Azarbaijan, the Shaikhi community was led by Ḥājī Mīrzā Šafī‘ Teqat-al-Eslām Tabrīzī (ca. 1218/1803-1301/1884; q.v.) and Ḥojjat-al-Eslām Mollā Moḥammad Mamaqānī (d. 1268/1851-52 or 1269/1852-53; q.v.) and included numbers of influential individuals among the ‘*olamā*’, merchants (*tojjār*), government officials, and nobility (see Čahārdehī, pp. 175-98). Although the Shaikhi establishment in Tabrīz asserted its orthodoxy by playing a central role in the condemnation and execution of Sayyed ‘Alī-Moḥammad the Bāb (q.v.) in 1264/1848 and 1266/1850 (see MacEoin, *From Shaykhism*, pp. 130-31), this did not result in an immediate resolution of the issue between the two parties. In 1266/1850, Mīrzā Aḥmad Tabrīzī declared *takfīr* against the Shaikhis and issued a *fatwā* banning them from the public baths. An altercation ensued and was followed by serious rioting throughout the city (Čahārdehī, pp. 49-50). Another outbreak of violence occurred in 1285/1868-69 following the death of Mamaqānī (Bāmdād, *Rejāl* VI, p. 83). In general, the Shaikhi and Bālāsarī communities remained religiously and socially divided, with separate mosques and baths, a ban on intermarriage, and restricted social relations. Efforts to reconcile the two groups were made by Mīrzā ‘Alī Teqat-al-Eslām (1277/1860-1330/1912; q.v.), a Shaikhi leader whose involvement in the Constitutional movement and death at the hands of the Russians were major factors in the reintegration of the Shaikhis into the orthodox community in the post-Constitutional period.

The situation in Kermān was equally complicated by political and social factors. The first head of the Shaikhi community there, Ḥājī Moḥammad-Karīm Khan Kermānī (1225/1810-1288/1870; q.v.), was the most successful of the claimants to overall leadership of the school in Iraq and Iran. Kermānī’s father, Ebrāhīm Khan Ḥāzīr-al-Dawla, was a cousin and son-in-law of Fath-‘Alī Shah and served as governor of Kermān from 1218/1803 until his death in 1240/1824-25 (Aḥmadī, *Farmāndehān*, pp. 50-55). Ḥāzīr-al-Dawla’s descendants, known as the Ebrāhīmīs, remained one of the most important families in the region and were closely linked to the Shaikhi school through Karīm Khan, whose control over much of his father’s inheritance gave him considerable influence within the family. During the period of Karīm Khan’s leadership, relations between Shaikhis and non-Shaikhis in Kermān were relaxed, but



conditions deteriorated after his death and the succession of his second son, Ḥājj Moḥammad Khan (1263/1846-1324/1906).

In 1294/1877, there was general unrest in Kermān following a rise in bread prices. At one point, attacks were made by a mob on houses belonging to Shaikhis (Scarcia, p. 223). Some months after the death of the town's leading *mojtahed*, Ḥājj Āqā Aḥmad Rafsanjānī, in the following year, trouble broke out between his son, Ḥājj Shaikh Abū Ja'far, and Moḥammad-Raḥīm Khan, the older brother of the Shaikhi leader, Moḥammad Khan. According to Mostawfī, a group of Shaikhis initiated the violence that followed by launching an attack on the house of Shaikh Abū Ja'far (Jalali, pp. 187-88). The dispute was only settled when Nāṣer-al-Dīn Shah summoned both Abū Ja'far and Moḥammad-Raḥīm Khan to Tehran.

During the next thirty years or so, Moḥammad Khan remained the most influential religious figure in Kermān, combining spiritual authority with immense wealth and close links with the ruling dynasty. Although the total number of Shaikhis in Iran at this point was only about 50,000, of whom 7,000 lived in Kermān province (Sykes, *Ten Thousand Miles*, p. 197), the sect's influence was considerable. Moẓaffar-al-Dīn Mīrzā (shah from 1896) was known to have become a Shaikhi while living in Tabrīz (Bāmdād, *Rejāl* IV, p. 121), while many other Qajar notables were attached with varying degrees of closeness to the school and its leadership. Scarcia describes Shaikhism as “a sort of bland, innocuous, and quasi-snobbish type of anticlerical movement of the court” (“Kerman 1905,” p. 201).

In Kermān itself, the influence of the Ebrāhīmī family was challenged by that of the Wakīlīs, descendants of Moḥammad-Esmā'īl Khan Wakīl-al-Molk I (governor of Kermān from 1277/1860 to 1284/1868), many of whom held important posts in the local administration. The first sign of wider opposition to Ebrāhīmī/Shaikhi dominance came in the form of demonstrations against Moḥammad Khan in Torbat-e Ḥaydariya and Mašhad during a pilgrimage made by him to the latter town in 1319/1901 (Jalali, p. 191). Moḥammad Khan's unpopularity seems to have had less to do with religious animosity than with his role as a Qajar notable and his expressed disapproval of constitutionalism (Bayat, *Mysticism and Dissent*, p. 182), a position which contrasted markedly with that of Azarbaijani Shaikhis such as Teqat-al-Eslām.

Matters reached a head in the Shaikhi-Bālāsarī “war” of 1323/1905, which has been described by some writers as “the spark that first set the fire of the



Constitutional Revolution” (ibid., p. 183). Trouble began in 1321/1903 under the governorship of Sardār ‘Azīz-Allāh Mīrzā Ṣafar-al-Ṣalṭana (q.v.), when protests about a rise in the price of bread were followed by attacks on the houses of the rich and on the Shaikhi *madrasa* (Scarcia, p. 224). Ṣafar-al-Ṣalṭana was dismissed in Rabī‘ I, 1322/May-June, 1904, and replaced by ‘Alī-Naqī Mīrzā Rokn-al-Dawla, who quickly alienated much of the populace. The new governor entrusted the tax administration of the province to the Ebrāhīmī family, thereby intensifying opposition, particularly on the part of the Wakīlīs (Kermānī, *Bīdārī*, p. 69). A sectarian dimension was introduced when a preacher from Mašhad, Shaikh Šamšīrī Barīnī, arrived in Kermān and, after agitating against Zoroastrians and Hindus, began to issue public condemnations of the Shaikhis. Barīnī was soon joined in his attacks by Ḥājj Mīrzā Moḥammad-Rezā, the son of the above-mentioned Shaikh Abū Ja‘far, who arrived in Kermān in Rabī‘ I, 1323/May, 1905, after a fourteen-year absence and quickly allied himself with the Wakīlī family (ibid., pp. 70-71). Fighting broke out in Jomādā I, 1323/July, 1905, when an attempt was made to take control of the Shaikhi Bāzār-e Šāh mosque. The authorities in Tehran responded by dismissing Rokn-al-Dawla and replacing him by Ṣafar-al-Ṣalṭana (ibid., pp. 72-73; Scarcia, pp. 228-29).

In Ša‘bān/October, Mīrzā Moḥammad-Rezā incurred the new governor’s displeasure by provoking attacks on Jewish homes. An attempt to control the situation was met by a declaration of *jehād* against the Shaikhis and the Qajars. Brief fighting was followed by the arrest, bastinado, and expulsion of Moḥammad-Rezā and some of his colleagues. This led in turn to a boycott of the mosques by all of the town’s ‘*olamā*’ except for Moḥammad Khan (Scarcia, pp. 230-31). At this point, however, the Shaikhi/Bālāsarī element took a back seat as leading ‘*olamā*’ in Tehran reacted to the bastinado of Mīrzā Moḥammad-Rezā. What had started as a local sectarian squabble now acquired a wider dimension as a factor in the agitation for a constitution (Kermānī, *Bīdārī*, pp. 78ff.). Moḥammad Khan’s death in Moḥarram, 1324/February, 1906, served to reduce further the religious aspect of the quarrel, and with the end of the Qajar hegemony, Shaikhi influence on local politics diminished considerably. Anti-Shaikhi feeling has re-emerged occasionally in the modern period (Scarcia, pp. 236-37), but with none of its former intensity. The murder of the Shaikhi leader [Abu’l-Qāsem Ebrāhīmī](#) in 1979 led to the transfer of the school’s leadership to Iraq, but otherwise the position of the Shaikhi communities of Iran appears to be little changed.



See also SHAIKHISM.

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