



BĀQER KHAN SĀLĀR-E MELLĪ

BĀQER KHAN SĀLĀR-e MELLĪ, one of the popular heroes of the Constitutional Revolution during the defense of Tabrīz in the period of the Lesser Autocracy (*estebdād-e šağīr*, Jomādā I, 1326-Rabiʿ II, 1327/June, 1908-July, 1909). Son of Ḥājī Reżā, he was born in Tabrīz in the 1870s and was a bricklayer by profession before emerging as the chief *lūṭī* of the Kīābān quarter, one of the largest in Tabrīz, located in the extreme east of the city and home of some middle rank pro-Constitution '*olamā*'. Being himself from an orthodox (*motašarre*) background but with an inclination to the pro-Constitution Shaikhi leader Teqat al-Eslām, he joined the ranks of the revolutionary militia (*mojāhedīn*) no later than Rabiʿ I, 1325/May, 1907. During the earliest rounds of clashes between the supporters of the Anjoman-e Ayālatī (provincial assembly) of Tabrīz and their local opponents, he led a small band from his own quarter as a semi-independent force only partially under the control of the Anjoman. Later, like his fellow citizen Sattār Khan Sardār-e Mellī (q.v.) he was recruited into the newly organized police force in an effort to check the urban disturbances and repel the royalist-inspired raids of the Šāhsevan chief Raḥīm Khan Čalabīānlū.

In the following months he rose to some prominence as a result of some internal developments of which the most significant were the increasing insecurity and the threat of the local tribal khans; the final polarization of the city quarters into pro- and anti-Constitution groupings—partly but not wholly on traditional sectarian lines—with the Anjoman representing the Kīābān, Amīrkīz, and southeastern quarters, and the rival Eslāmīya prevalent in



Šotorbān (Devečī), Sorḳāb, and Bāgmīša (see “La carte de Tauris pendant la révolution,” in E. G. Browne, *The Persian Revolution of 1905-1909*, London, 1910, pp. 248-49); the further consolidation of the *mojāhedīn* and the inner struggle for the control of the Anjoman between the Caucasian faction directed by the Markaz-e Ġaybī (Secret center) and the native faction supported by most merchants and pro-Constitution ‘*olamā*’, with which Kīābān was associated; and finally the difficulties in supplying provisions to the city. These elements provided a suitable climate for the chief *lūṭīs* like Nā’eb Bāqer to gain supremacy, as the trouble-ridden Anjoman and the city authorities were dependent on them for maintaining order.

The intensification of the struggle against Moḥammad-‘Alī Shah and the Constitutionalists’ resistance to the reimposition of the despotic rule turned Bāqer Khan in the eye of the public into a local hero. What added a crucial boost to Bāqer Khan’s popularity was his commitment to the ideals of *Mašrūṭa*—as he understood them—which was largely lacking among the *lūṭīs* of the rival quarters. As the tension between Moḥammad-‘Alī Shah and the Majles reached its apex, the Constitutionalists of Tabrīz dispatched Bāqer Khan, Sattār Khan, and other *mojāhedīn* to Bāsmenj (12 miles southeast of Tabrīz) to recruit a force of 300 and march to Tehran in defense of the Majles (17 Jomādā I 1326/17 June 1908), but soon the disappointing news from the capital and the impending danger of attacks on Tabrīz made Bāqer Khan return to the barricades of his own quarter and prepare for a defense which lasted ten months. The fighting started immediately in Tabrīz after the fall of the Majles (23 Jomādā I 1326/23 June 1908) when, along with the coup in Tehran, Moḥammad-‘Alī ordered an assault on the Constitutionalists’ position in the southeastern wing of the city. Bāqer Khan resisted the joint forces of Eslāmīya and Qarajadāgi horsemen and soon was able to inflict heavy casualties on them. But in less than two weeks the government advances frustrated his hopes, and made him cede to Russian pressure and signal his surrender by hoisting a white flag over his quarter (3 Jomādā II 1326/4 July 1908). However, the stiff resistance and persuasion of Sattār Khan, who reminded Bāqer Khan of their earlier pledge, made him resume the fighting. Bāqer Khan remained overshadowed for the rest of the engagements, however, by the more adventurous Sattār Khan as the core of the resistance was gradually moved to Amīrkīz. In the months prior to Ša’bān, 1326/August, 1908, when the reinforced government troops under the command of the newly appointed governor ‘Ayn-al-Dawla started a new offensive, the coalition of the two leaders effectively reduced the danger of Eslāmīya, pushed Raḥīm



Khan's forces out of the city, reorganized the *mojāhedīn*, unified most quarters in their defensive strategy, and defeated the Mākū regiment.

In the next prolonged phase of the conflict (Ša'bān, 1326-Rabī' I, 1327/August, 1908-May, 1909), Bāqer Khan's skill in street battles was further extended to open-field combat; in the major battle of Sārīdāg (29 Šafar 1327/22 March 1909), one of the highlights of his career, he led the *mojāhedīn* forces to capture the positions overlooking Tabrīz and tried, though suffering high casualties, to open the supply routes to the starving city. The outcome of the fighting remained inconclusive, yet resistance led by Bāqer Khan and Sattār Khan exhausted the government troops and forced 'Ayn-al-Dawla to negotiate for lifting the siege. Furthermore, for some months Tabrīz demonstrated the only effective opposition to Moḥammad-'Alī Shah and remained a source of encouragement for the formation of other centers of resistance. But the weakening position of the shah made the Russians intervene, and the starvation and shortages gave them the necessary pretext to bring a small contingent into Tabrīz, thus frustrating the short-lived hopes of an imminent victory and forcing Bāqer Khan and Sattār Khan to seek refuge in the Ottoman consulate (8 Rabī' II 1327/29 April 1909). Yet despite the Russian's threatening gestures, Moḥammad-'Alī's position was irredeemable, and soon after his abdication (27 Jomādā II 1327/16 July 1909) Bāqer Khan felt safe enough to return to the scene, though only to encounter a mixed reception.

In the course of the next year, though his personal popularity as the hero of the resistance was hardly ever tarnished by the excesses of his supporters or by his unsuccessful campaign around the province, both the provincial governor Mok̄ber-al-Salṭana, who showed some anxiety over the alleged disturbances and intervention of the *mojāhedīn*, and the Russian consul, who became exceedingly apprehensive of the potential danger posed by Bāqer Khan, were critical of his presence. Their combined pressure, blessed with British approval, compelled the central government to arrange for the forced departure of Bāqer Khan and Sattār Khan for Tehran. Though in appearance it was a half-hearted invitation to show gratitude for their efforts to reestablish the Constitution, in reality it was an exile from which they never returned (7 Rabī' I 1328/19 March 1910). The effusive welcome at Tehran, ephemeral and ironic as it appears, was still an acknowledgment of their popularity and the role they played in the restoration of the Constitution. But soon the bitter power struggle between the rival Constitutionalist factions made the recently arrived heroes of Tabrīz side with political groupings about whom they knew



very little. Bāqer Khan nominally allied himself with the Moderates (*e'tedālīyūn*) and tried in vain to secure some place for himself within the exclusive circle of influential statesmen, but soon, following Sattār Khan, he joined with 'Abd-al-Ḥosayn Khan Mo'ezz-al-Solṭān Sardār Moḥyī, a revolutionary leader from Gīlān who shared the same grievances and disappointments with the Tabrīzī leaders. In less than four months, despite widespread support and popularity, Bāqer Khan and his partners become politically isolated. They enjoyed neither the support of the Baḳtīārī-Armenian coalition (under the co-leadership of Sardār As'ad [q.v.] and Yeprem [q.v.] who both were on good terms with the Democrats) nor that of the Moderates headed by Moḥammad-Walī Khan Sepahdār. The wave of assassinations and feuding quickly culminated in a showdown in Pār-k-e Atābak, the residence of Sattār Khan and the center for the *mojāhedīn*. After a brief resistance Sattār Khan and Bāqer Khan had to surrender with humiliation when their supporters who ignored the Majles ultimatum for disarmament were crushed by government troops (30 Rajab 1328/7 August 1910). This was probably a plot sponsored by the Democrats to get rid of the Azarbaijani *mojāhedīn* and subject their leaders to isolation and despair.

After five years of obscurity in Tehran and living on a government pension, in the summer of the 1915 and on the occasion of Mohājarat (immigration) and the formation of a nationalist government in exile, Bāqer Khan joined the Committee for National Defense and together with remnants of the Tabrīz resistance participated in skirmishes with Russian forces before retreating to Kermānšāh and later to Karkūk and Mosul as the Ottoman forces were withdrawing from western Iran. Though disillusioned and in despair, Bāqer Khan preferred to remain on the Kurdistan border rather than retreat to Turkey. In Moḥarram, 1335/November, 1916, in the confused days just before the British advance in northern Iraq, while wandering in the border villages near Qaṣr-e Šīrīn, he was offered overnight shelter by the Kurdish bandit Moḥammad-Amīn Ṭālebānī who on the same night murdered him and all his party and dumped their bodies nearby.

Bāqer Khan was said to be a bold and short-tempered patriot, a good example of the popular hero with loyalties not only to his own quarter and city, but to the whole of the Constitutional ideals. He was politically unsophisticated, however, and was susceptible to easy manipulation. He hardly ever escaped from what might be called the *lūṭī* mentality. Time and again he was deceived and ignored because of errors in judgment, when, for instance, he gave in to



the persuasions of the Russian agent in Tabrīz or made his plans public in the battle of Sārīdāg or miscalculated the Russian military move or underestimated the rival political factions in Tehran. He was typical of those Constitutionalists whose sincere hopes and aspirations were repeatedly frustrated by the vested interests of the dominant groups. Bāqer Khan was helplessly caught up in a complex political situation, yet he emerged as the symbol of a momentary resistance and was acknowledged as such when many other figures of the Constitutional period disappeared in the twilight of the post-Constitutional politics.

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