



DAWLATĀBĀDĪ, SAYYED YAḤYĀ

DAWLATĀBĀDĪ, SAYYED YAḤYĀ (b. Daw-latābād near Isfahan, 17 Rajab 1279/8 January 1863, d. Tehran, 4 Ābān 1318 Š./26 October 1939), celebrated educator, political activist, and memoirist of the constitutional and postconstitutional periods. Yaḥyā was the second of the five sons of an affluent family of landowning 'olamā'. His father, Ḥājj Sayyed Mīrzā Hādī Dawlatābādī, was an influential local *mojtahed* and leader of the clandestine Azalī branch of [Babism](#) in Persia. A haphazard education at traditional koranic schools (*maktab*) left a negative impression on young Yaḥyā, an impression further reinforced at the Ṣadr *madrasa* in Isfahan and later the Mo'tamad-al-Dawla *madrasa* in Najaf in Iraq, where he joined his father in 1290/1873. Residing in Najaf added to his distaste for the conservative clerical milieu and its suffocating conformity (Dawlatābādī, *Ḥayāt-e Yaḥyā* I, pp. 11-18, 28-34).

After the family returned to Isfahan in 1294/1877 Yaḥyā witnessed his father's involvement in an extremely complex struggle for control of the city, with some of the influential 'olamā', most notably Moḥammad-Bāqer Najafī Eṣfahānī and his son Moḥammad-Taqī, better known as [Āqā Najafī](#), on one side and the powerful prince-governor of Isfahan, Mas'ūd Mīrzā Ḥell-al-Solṭān, on the other (Daw-latābādī, *Ḥayāt-e Yaḥyā* I, pp. 37-44). The ambitious Mīrzā Hādī, whose Babi affiliation was a stigma impossible to disguise by any measure of dissimulation (*taqīya*), was able to build a popular base in Isfahan, at first with the tacit backing of Ḥell-al-Solṭān, who hoped thus to weaken



Najafī's domination of the city. Soon, however, Hādī was denounced by Najafī as a heretic, which encouraged Żell-al-Solţān to put into action his own covetous land-grabbing schemes at the expense of Yaḥyā's father. Having become a pariah, Yaḥyā found his stay in Isfahan becoming increasingly hazardous, in spite of his attempts to distance himself from the rival Bahai faction among the Babis, whose exiled leadership he bedeviled consistently.

Yaḥyā, after a year and a half of self-imposed exile in Tehran and Mašhad, as a result of his denunciation (*takfīr*) by the 'olamā', returned to Isfahan in 1299/1882; there he frequented the local literati. An encounter with the ascetic Babi preacher Shaikh Moḥammad Manšādī Yazdī influenced him, as well as two other, later proponents of the [Constitutional Revolution](#), Naşr-Allāh Beheštī (later Malek-al-Motakallemīn) and Jamāl-al-Dīn Wā'eż Eşfahānī. Yaḥyā was also impressed by [Mīrzā Āqā Khan Kermānī](#), then a refugee from his native province. Āqā Khan's intellectual disposition and rhetoric, blending modernism and esoteric thought, served as a model for the receptive Yaḥyā (*Ḥayāt-e Yaḥyā I*, pp. 62-68).

After fresh denunciations, partly elicited by his repeated defiance of the 'olamā' and Żell-al-Solţān, Mīrzā Yaḥyā was banished from Isfahan a second time, between 1303/1886 and 1306/1888. He paid a short visit to Aleppo, then returned to the 'Atabāt, where for a year he occasionally audited Mīrzā Ḥasan Şīrāzī's lectures on jurisprudence before embarking on the Ḥajj (pilgrimage) via Alexandria and Cairo. He returned as far as Būšeher in 1304/1887, but news of fresh Babi persecutions in Isfahan forced him to retreat to the relative safety of the 'Atabāt. He did finally return to Isfahan in 1306/1888 but was unable to stay there. By decree of Nāşer-al-Dīn Shah (1264-1313/1848-96) Yaḥyā and his father settled in the capital, where they found a protector in the person of the vizier [Mīrzā 'Alī-Aşġar Khan Amīn-al-Solţān](#) (*Ḥayāt-e Yaḥyā I*, pp. 69-90, 111-12, 118-19).

In Tehran Yaḥyā instructed members of the nobility in calligraphy. While attending the lectures of the celebrated jurist Mīrzā Ḥasan Āştīānī, presumably in order to stave off suspicion of Babi heresy, he also had an opportunity to observe at close quarters the growing power of the 'olamā' in a time of political turmoil. He was present when an angry crowd briefly stormed the royal citadel during the protest against the monopolistic [Tobacco Régie](#) of 1309-11/1891-92. In the meantime interest in speculative thought brought him to Mīrzā Abu'l-Ḥasan Jelwa, the leading philosopher of his time. None of these activities was able to assuage the moral crisis that he was experiencing at that



time, however, a crisis exacerbated by increasing harassment, confiscation of family property, and diminishing income (*Ḥayāt-e Yaḥyā* I, pp. 108-22).

The social quarantine imposed upon Yaḥyā because of his Babi associations finally came to an end only during the reign of Moẓaffar-al-Dīn Shah (1313-24/1896-1906). The reformist [Mīrzā ‘Alī Khan Amīn-al-Dawla](#) was appointed vizier in 1314/1897, which encouraged Yaḥyā to try to change his father’s course “according to the needs of the time and move in the direction of fundamental actions that could bring progress, development, and freedom of the country” (*Ḥayāt-e Yaḥyā* I, pp. 176-77). Although he remained a member of the ‘*olamā*’, establishing secular schools and furthering modern education became the focus of his attention for the next ten years, perhaps the most fruitful period of his career. As a founding member of the Council of education ([Anjoman-e ma‘āref](#)), to which he was appointed by Amīn-al-Dawla in 1315/1898 (*Ḥayāt-e Yaḥyā* I, p. 188; *Eḥtešām-al-Salṭana*, pp. 322 ff.), he brought his considerable imagination and discretion to bear in working with the daring but abrasive aristocrat Maḥmūd Khan Eḥtešām-al-Salṭana, the determined and intransigent Mīrzā Ḥasan Rošdīya, and others. In his memoirs Dawlatābādī may have overstated his own achievements and criticized his rivals too harshly, yet he should be credited with his persistence in establishing new schools and preparing the earliest elementary textbooks and school curricula. Eḥtešām-al-Salṭana (p. 529) characterized him as an honest and dedicated colleague, who nevertheless suffered from “extreme selfishness and self-centeredness” (*ḵod-ḵvāhī-e mofraṭ wa ḵod-pasandī-e bīandāza*). In 1316/1899 Yaḥyā founded the Madrasa-ye motabarreka-ye sādāt, which was dedicated to teaching the children of the poor among the descendants of the Prophet Moḥammad (*sādāt*). By promoting modern schooling for this group he not only challenged arcane scholasticism but also attempted to shaped the students into a constituency that could compete with seminarians (*ṭalaba*) educated in traditional *madrāsas*. He was also partly responsible for establishing at least three other schools, the Adab, Kamālīya, and Dāneš, but his involvement led to personal quarrels and drained his finances (Dawlatābādī, *Ḥayāt-e Yaḥyā* I, pp. 178-204, 237-67).

The events leading up to the Constitutional Revolution (1924-29/1906-11) opened a new chapter in the lives of Yaḥyā Dawlatābādī and his younger brother ‘Alī-Moḥammad (q.v.). They were among the early members of a small but influential revolutionary circle of Azalī persuasion, which also included Jamāl-al-Dīn Eṣfahānī and Malek-al-Motakallemīn, among others. At the same



time Yaḥyā established amicable ties with the proreform Ottoman ambassador Šams-al-Dīn Beg, whose sympathy he hoped to evoke for the cause of constitutionalism in Persia. During the crucial protest of the ‘*olamā*’ in the shrine of Shah ‘Abd-al-‘Azīm, which ultimately led to the “constitutional decree,” in 1324/1906 (see [CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION ii](#)), Yaḥyā acted as a political broker between the reformist faction led by [Sayyed ‘Abd-Allāh Behbahānī](#) and the government of ‘*Ayn-al-Dawla*. According to his version of those events, he was the first to include in the list of otherwise mundane requests submitted by the ‘*olamā*’ a general demand for “reform in all affairs,” which was soon articulated by himself and his collaborators as a demand for creation of a “justice bureau” (*dīvān-e ‘adālat*) and a “national house of consultation” (*mašwarat-kāna-ye mellī*) to execute the “law of equity” (*qānūn-e mosāwāt*) in all parts of Persia (*Ḥayāt-e Yaḥyā II*, pp. 22-24). Neither of these ideas was by any means novel in the dissident milieu of the time.

In spite of his ardent support for constitutionalism, Dawlatābādī’s public role was compromised by his Bābī background, for which he was almost ostracized from the circles around the leading proconstitutionalist ‘*olamā*’, Behbahānī and Sayyed Moḥammad Ṭabā-ṭabā’ī. Furthermore, his hopes of close collaboration with such members of the reformist nobility as Eḥtešām-al-Salṭana and Maḥdīqolī Khan Moḵber-al-Salṭana, in order to combat opposition from the royalists, achieved limited results. His stigma as a Babi may also have barred him and his cohorts from election as deputies to the first constitutional Majles. In an attempt to strengthen his political stand, Dawlatābādī even tried, with little success, to patch up old differences with Shaikh Fażl-Allāh Nūrī, Behbahānī’s bitter opponent and later the leader of the anticonstitutional ‘*olamā*’. These setbacks did little to diminish Dawlatābādī’s revolutionary zeal, however.

In 1325/1907, when the revolutionary activities of the *anjomans* were at a peak, Dawlatābādī helped to form the influential Anjoman-e markazī-e aṣnāf (Central association of guilds) in the Tehran *bāzār*, drawing on members who were loyal to his father. As the mentor and spokesman for this *anjoman*, he had by mid-1326/1908 become sufficiently committed to the radical (*tondrow*) constitutionalist wing to be singled out by Moḥammad-‘Alī Shah (1324-27/1907-09) as one of eight antimonarchist activists within the Majles and the *anjomans*. Dawlatābādī’s guilt was further confirmed in the eyes of the shah when he emerged as a prominent member of the Defense committee (Komīsīyūn-e modāfa‘a) responsible for recruiting the militia forces of the



anjomans to defend the Majles. It was only his personal circumspection that saved him on the night preceding the coup of 23 Jomādā I 1326/23 June 1908, when the Majles was bombarded. He sought refuge in a safe house while some of his revolutionary friends were arrested and executed. Having received verbal assurance of his safety from the British embassy, he then moved to the British-protected village of Qolhak north of Tehran, where his father had a family retreat adjacent to the British summer residence. After some negotiation with the court he welcomed an offer of voluntary exile and left Persia shortly afterward.

He arrived in Istanbul during the period of ferment preceding the revolution of the Young Turks but was received unenthusiastically by the *Anjoman-e sa'adat*, which was dominated by exiled Azarbaijani constitutionalists suspicious of his background and motives. His acquaintance with political leaders of the Committee for union and progress (*Etteḥād o taraqqī komītasī*), including Prince Ṣalāḥ-al-Dīn, leader of the federalist *Aḥrār* party; Ṭal'at Pasha, later a member of the Young Turk triumvirate; and Shaikh Jamāl-al-Dīn, *ṣayk-al-Eslām* (the highest religious official) of Istanbul, helped to boost Dawlatābādī's morale, though these men offered little practical help in furthering the Persian cause.

Dawlatābādī returned to Tehran in October 1909, three months after the city had been retaken by constitutionalist forces in July. His hesitation proved well founded. Despite his personal acquaintance with most of the revolutionary leaders, his efforts to steer a middle course between the newly organized *E'tedaliyūn* (moderates) and the radicals of the Democratic party drove him farther into isolation. His condescending disposition to "advise" people in power marginalized him still further. Although he eventually tilted toward the Democrats, he never abandoned his self-appointed role as an "interparty mediator" (*moṣleḥ-e dāt-al-bayn*; *Ḥayāt-e Yaḥyā* III, p. 121). His political views on the need for the separation of religious and secular authorities, expressed in his treatises *Armaḡān-e Yaḥyā* and *Rāhnemā-ye entekābāt-e Majles-e šūrā-ye mellī*, in which he called for election of nonclerical figures, did not enhance his stature among the '*olamā*'. His frustration at the outcome of the revolutionary process reached a new height when, after the parliamentary election in June 1911, his credentials as deputy from Kermān to the Second Majles were heatedly challenged by his clerical opponents. Accused of having "corrupt beliefs," he was forced to present his resignation and to refrain temporarily from all political activity. Seeking a pretext to leave Persia, in July 1911 he



went to Europe at the invitation of the organizers of the International Congress of the Races, a philanthropic gathering in London (*Ḥayāt-e Yaḥyā* III, pp. 144-52).

On the eve of World War I the domestic situation in Persia and fear of partition loomed large in the minds of patriots like Dawlatābādī. Soon after his return to Tehran he joined the nationalist “emigrants” (*mohājerīn*), who left the capital for Qom in November 1915, as a protest against the threat of Russian aggression. Subsequently he became a prominent member of the newly formed National defense committee (*Komīta-ye defā‘-e mellī*) in Hamadān and then in Kermānšāh (*Ḥayāt-e Yaḥyā* III, pp. 300 ff.). The committee, set up with German backing, became a provisional government in charge of conducting the national resistance against the Anglo-Russian occupation. After several military defeats during 1334/1915 and 1335/1916 the nationalists retreated to Qaṣr-e Šīrīn, under the temporary protection of Sanjābī tribal chiefs, and soon after to Baghdad and then to Istanbul. Dawlatābādī arrived in Istanbul in early 1916 to find an atmosphere of gloom among the exiles, whose ranks were riddled with factionalism and personal animosities. The resourceful Dawlatābādī was able to renew his ties with the Young Turks, and it was perhaps at Ṭal‘at Pasha’s suggestion that he first traveled to Berlin and then to Stockholm (*Ḥayāt-e Yaḥyā* IV, pp. 32-40), at that time the center of intelligence gathering and espionage. On the pretext of participating in the International Socialist Congress, he appears to have engaged in some intelligence activities (*Ḥayāt-e Yaḥyā* IV, p. 53). Soon after the Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917 and the ensuing Russian withdrawal from the Caucasian and Antolian fronts, including Persian Azarbaijan, Dawlatābādī hastened back to Persia. Benefiting from generous German assistance, he apparently was entrusted with the task of organizing a pro-German nationalist resistance against imminent British advances in the north of Persia (*Ḥayāt-e Yaḥyā* IV, pp. 160-66), a resistance already apparent in Shaikh Moḥammad Kīābānī’s uprising in Tabrīz and the Jangalī movement in Gīlān (see [COMMUNISM](#) i).

The general armistice of October 1918, combined with the demise of the Young Turks and imperial Germany, put an end to this resistance. The formidable task of political reorientation prompted Dawlatābādī to turn for support to the victorious British. In Isfahan he managed to penetrate the clandestine Āhan committee (*Komīta-ye āhan*), which was apparently set up to create a unified pro-British front in chaotic postwar Persia (*Ḥayāt-e Yaḥyā* IV, pp. 114-15, 167



ff.). He was soon deprived of any meaningful role in this perfunctory organization, however, possibly because he was not trusted by other pro-British participants. The growing unpopularity of the [1919 Anglo-Persian agreement](#) in Persia, moreover, dictated that Dawlatābādī should accentuate his differences with the prime minister Mīrzā Ḥasan Khan Woṭūq-al-Dawla and his allies. The Āhan committee was later transformed in Tehran into the Zarganda committee and became one of the groups supporting the [coup d'état of 1299 Š./1921](#). In the treacherous political climate of postwar Tehran Dawlatābādī's advocacy of political harmony and austere patriotism, as expressed in his criticism of the [1919 Anglo-Persian Agreement](#) and of the rigged election of the Fourth Majles only prolonged his political quarantine.

The rise of Reżā Khan Sardār-e Sepah (later Reżā Shah), especially after the collapse of the government of Sayyed Żiā'-al-Dīn Ṭabāṭabā'ī in June 1921, opened new prospects for Dawlatābādī. He soon managed to develop a close, though ephemeral, rapport with Reżā Khan, who was admired as a champion of security and national renewal by many frustrated constitutionalists like Dawlatābādī. Reżā Khan, on the other hand, detected in Dawlatābādī a clerical advocate of modernity willing to promote his cause in return for long-sought admission to the main political arena. As the opposition '*olamā*' were intimidated by the new military regime, in January-February 1923 Dawlatābādī was able to win election as deputy from Isfahan to the Fifth Majles, where he came to play a notable role as an early promoter of Reżā Khan. He was an influential member of a committee of eight liberal politicians (including Moḥammad Moṣaddeq and Ḥasan Taqīzāda) who for a while advised Reżā Khan on domestic and foreign affairs (*Ḥayāt-e Yaḥyā* IV, p. 325).

In 1303 Š./1924 Dawlatābādī initially supported Reżā Khan's call for republicanism, yet he later also entertained conspiratorial suspicions about the degree of British involvement in the affair. After the collapse of the republican trend Dawlatābādī and his liberal cohorts in the Majles were faced with the disagreeable choice of supporting the moribund Qajar dynasty or Reżā Khan's demand for change in the monarchy. Despite understandable trepidation, Yaḥyā was one of four deputies who, on 9 Ābān 1304 Š./31 October 1925, spoke out and voted against abolition of the Qajar dynasty and investiture of Reżā Shah Pahlavī. This gesture of resistance, fortified by references to the Constitution of 1324/1906, sealed Dawlatābādī's political fate, and he, along with other veteran politicians, was relegated to a political oblivion from which he never reemerged. After a three-year residence in



Brussels, where he served as an informal cultural attaché, he retired to Tehran and completed his famous memoirs, *Tārīk-e mo'āşer yā ḥayat-e Yahyā*. He died in 1318/1939 and was buried at his own summer home at Zarganda in Qolhak, which was later expanded to include a public library. His tomb was destroyed after the Revolution of 1357 Š./1979.

Yaḥyā Dawlatābādī best epitomized the spirit of modernism in the quarter-century between the assassination of Nāşer-al-Dīn Shah in 1313/1896 and the accession of Reżā Shah Pahlavī in 1324 Š./1925, the crucial era in the shaping of modern Persia. Not only did he witness the major developments of his own time and record them for posterity, but also he himself helped to influence the emergence of modern education, the growth of constitutionalism, revolutionary and postrevolutionary events, and the rise of the Pahlavi dynasty. His primary themes were separation of clerical and political authority, the importance of education and later of economic planning, devotion to the Constitution, condemnation of political factionalism, and above all morality and patriotism, all rooted in the Western-inspired modernism of his generation, though his attraction to many of them also reflected his religious inclinations. Indeed, it was his persistence in preserving a private Babi identity while trying to assimilate to the liberal polity of his time that proved the greatest obstacle to his political success. Although he never referred to his Babi affiliation in the four volumes of his memoirs, his career demonstrated the formidable barriers the majority political culture placed in the way of reformers of nonorthodox background. In the eyes of the 'olamā' no one better symbolized the heretical nature of modernism than Dawlatābādī, even though he attempted to preserve his Islamic garb all his life.

Dawlatābādī's self-censorship and his self-righteous tone undermined the quality of the otherwise remarkable record of his life contained in his memoirs, among the best produced by men of his generation. He should be recognized for his successful blend of insight, thoroughness, organization, and relative impartiality in his account of the history of modern Persia. His literary style, though slightly marred by a constant use of the present tense in an effort to convey con-temporaneity, combined the erudition of a seasoned writer with the flexibility of a politician and the analysis of a historian. It was based on diaries and notes that he had kept over the years. He completed the first edition of the memoirs in 1314 Š./1935 and revised it in 1316 Š./1937, an exercise in which he at times sacrificed immediate impressions to hindsight.



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