



JABAL 'ĀMEL

JABAL 'ĀMEL, SHI'ITE ULAMA OF, in the Safavid Period. Two decades after the establishment of the Safavid state in Persia in 1501, the Safavid monarchs sought prominent clerics who would strengthen their rule by promoting a standard urban system of Shi'ite worship and lend them political legitimacy against their Sunnite Ottoman foes. Neither the Qezelbāš who adhered to heterodox militant Shi'ism, nor the erudite Persian notables who had a general Sunnite training were capable of providing the Safavid state with a collective social consciousness congenial to empire building and stability. The shahs, who were widely perceived as divinely guided charismatic leaders, gradually transformed their rule from a communal Shi'ism to a state-operated Shi'ism. Meanwhile, several Arab theologians from Jabal 'Āmel in southern Lebanon (see also [SHI'ITES IN LEBANON](#)), along with their families, were emigrating from Ottoman Syria to Iraq, Mecca, India, and Persia. A number of historical factors motivated this emigration, namely, a surplus of jurists who could not find a professional outlet to their expertise, first due to a decrease in opportunities within the Ottoman learning system, and second, due to their limited ability to implement and formally spread their Shi'ite legal rulings in 'Āmeli villages and towns, and third, due to the Ottoman suppression and threat against publicly active Shi'ite *mojtaheds*. In addition, a few 'Āmeli scholars who were professing and implementing *ejtehād* (q.v. "legal inference") came under close Ottoman scrutiny and at least one eminent scholar, Zayn-al-Din 'Āmeli (see Kohlberg), among Shi'ites widely known as al-Šahid al-Ṭāni "the Second martyr" (1506-58), was put to death by the Ottomans. The Safavids, in contrast, found the 'Āmelis' use of *ejtehād* helpful in



developing new theological positions that supported dynastic authority and projected an image of Islamic “authenticity” to their Ottoman rivals to the west.

The nature, scope and reasons for the emigration of 'Āmeli theologians and their families to Safavid Persia has been the center of academic debate in the last decade. Said Amir Arjomand was the first scholar in the West to highlight the significance and implications of the integration of 'Āmeli scholars into the Safavid religious structure (see Arjomand, pp. 105-211). Albert Hourani, inspired by Ḥosayn Modarresi Ṭabāṭabā'i, followed his lead by emphasizing the large-scale emigration of 'Āmeli scholars to Persia in the 16th and 17th centuries. To this, Andrew Newman, who looked at the early Safavid rule, responded by a denial of the 'Āmeli emigration altogether, arguing that the Syrian Arab scholars of Jabal 'Āmel found Qezelbāš Shi'ite beliefs too 'heterodox' to accept and rejected association with the Safavid monarchs (Newman). Rula Jurdi Abisaab challenged Newman's position after examining the historical circumstances of the 'Āmeli ulama in Ottoman Syria and followed their careers throughout the Safavid period. She suggested that the presence of more than 158 first- and second-generation émigré 'Āmeli scholars and their families in Safavid Persia, and their advent from a small region like Jabal 'Āmel, confirmed the emigration theory. She also pointed to the fluid and multifaceted nature of socio-political exchange between the Qezelbāš *amirs* and the 'Āmeli clerics (Abisaab, 1994, 2004). The latter supported the proclamation of the first Safavid ruler Shah Esmā'il I (q.v., r. 1501-24) that Twelver Shi'ism, mainly of an urban legal nature, would become the foundation of his new kingdom (even if conversion to Shi'ism happened much later). Devin Stewart, too, suggested that the 'Āmeli scholars were not reluctant to associate with the Safavid court, but he noted that the emigration from Jabal 'Āmel to Persia was limited in scope (Stewart).

Beyond the scholastic-social ties that bound the founders of the *madrasas* (religious schools) of Jabal 'Āmel and their disciples together, there was a marked network of kinship relations, both consanguinal and marital, that reinforced the solidarity and elitism of this community. Access to knowledge of Islamic law (*šari'a*) tended to concentrate in tightly knit family groups and became the esteemed possession of their immediate descendants. By the early 16th century, Jabal 'Āmel became the foremost center for Shi'ite learning and an accrediting institution, producing and influencing hundreds of theologians who lived or settled in Syria, Mecca, Iraq, Persia, and India. Among the most



prominent of these ulama were ‘Ali b. ‘Abd-al-‘Āli Karaki (d. 1534), Ḥosayn b. ‘Abd-al-Şamad (d. 1576), Ḥosayn Mojtahed (d. 1592), Bahā’-al-Din ‘Āmeli (q.v., d. 1621 or 1622), known as Shaikh Bahā’i, Mir Moḥammad-Bāqer b. Şams-al-Din Moḥammad Ḥosayni Astarābādi, known as Mir(-e) Dāmād (d. between 1631 and 1632, see DĀMĀD), Aḥmad b. Zayn-al-‘Ābedin (d. between 1644 and 1650; see Aḥmad ‘Alawi), Loṭf-Allāh Maysi (d. 1622-23), ‘Ali b. Moḥammad b. Ḥasan b. Zayn-al-Din ‘Āmeli (d. 1691), and Moḥammad b. Ḥasan Ḥorr ‘Āmeli (d. 1693; see representative works in bibliography). Except for ‘Ali b. Moḥammad b. Ḥasan b. Zayn-al-Din, all of the above theologians enjoyed close ties with the Safavid court, occupied the highest religious offices in Persia, and created the principal tools for the consolidation of Safavid rule. They never, however, acted independently or determined the Safavids’ policies as such. They accommodated the sovereign’s agendas while simultaneously manipulating the judicial domain and reworking vital social alliances among Persian elites to achieve some social autonomy and political power. During the reign of Shah Ṭahmāsp I (r. 1524-76) and Shah Esmā’il II (q.v., r. 1576-77), influential Qezelbāš *amirs* welcomed the ascendancy of ‘Āmeli clerics to the religious posts in order to undermine their rivals, namely, the Persian *şadrs* and bureaucrats.

Unlike Sayyed Ebrāhim Qaṭifi (fl. 16th cent.) and Iraqui Shi‘ite scholars at the time, the ‘Āmelis were prepared to transform Shi‘ism from a religion of the community to that of the state, proposing significant modifications in political theory and becoming highly equipped to circumvent Ottoman and Uzbek propaganda and ideological expansion. They espoused, with differing degree, a close affinity with secular sovereignty. This is best illustrated in their distinct approaches toward the issue of the performance of Friday prayers (*şalāt al-jom‘a*) at the time of the Major Occultation of the Twelfth Imam (see Karaki, *Resālat şalāt al-jom‘a*; Ḥosayn b. ‘Abd-al-Şamad, *al-‘Eqd al-ṭahmāsbi*; Ḥasan b. ‘Ali Karaki, *al-Bolḡa*; Mir Dāmād, *Resāla fi şalāt al-jom‘a*). The enactment of Friday prayers, which required the presence of a jurist further aimed at restoring the Shi‘ite community to political normalcy concomitant with state formation. Whether as rationalists (*oşulis*) who favored the use of rational inference in deriving legal rulings or as traditionists (*aḳbāris*, see [AḳBĀRIYA](#)) who relied solely on Hadith for religious guidance, leading ‘Āmeli scholars strengthened the foundation of Safavid rule. In terms of their involvement in converting Persia from Sunnism to Shi‘ism, the ‘Āmelis promoted anti-Sunnite rituals for practical political reasons, namely, to popularize Shi‘ite creed, create collective religious emblems, and advocate emotional immersion in



experiences distinguished as Shi'ite. Several competing and complementary versions of both Sunnism and Shi'ism existed at the time. On their part, the 'Āmeli clerics distinguished their version of legalistic Islam from popular heterodox and Sufi leanings and made the relevance of the sacred law to everyday life more pronounced for the layperson.

Far from remaining self-absorbed legal experts, the 'Āmeli jurists communicated their ideas through a network of students and followers who translated their juridical rulings into Persian, and state officials who turned them into decrees. The ulama's doctrinal, legal, and philosophical works reflected alterations in the monarchs' sources of legitimacy, a measure of control over the Qezelbāš, and centralization efforts at the hands of some sovereigns, particularly Shah 'Abbās I (r. 1587-1629). Legal and doctrinal works also reflected issues of economic stability and political conflict with the Ottomans, depopulation and forced migration aimed at thwarting Ottoman invasions in frontier areas heavily inhabited by Christians. The clerics' writings also reflected internal class conflicts, expressed in distinct ideological terms. At the time of Shah Taḥmāsp I (r. 1524-76), but mainly under Shah 'Abbās I, the translation from Arabic into Persian and abridgment of major Shi'ite texts of doctrine and positive law carried the legal-political debates from the exclusive circles of theologians to a vast community of low-ranking scholars, political figures, merchants and artisans (on translations from Arabic into Persian, see ĀZARNUŠ; Abisaab, 2004, pp. 27-29).

Encouraged by his teacher, the "Second Martyr," Ḥosayn b. 'Abd-al-Šamad left Jabal 'Āmel for Iraq and finally settled in Persia. With an eagerness to bring Persian society under the fold of Shi'ite legalism, Ḥosayn started actively to spread and propagate Shi'ite Hadith. Karaki had argued that observing Friday prayer was optional for Shi'ite Muslims and must only be held during the presence of a jurist who functions as the deputy of the Twelfth Imam. The social and political importance which Karaki gave to such a jurist created much resistance among Persian bureaucrats against the observance of Friday prayers, which was halted after his death. Ḥosayn, however, convinced Shah Taḥmāsp that holding Friday prayers was a powerful weapon against the anti-Shi'ite campaign of the Ottomans and their Uzbek allies, because it embellished the Islamic character of his kingdom. Ḥo-sayn also tried to disentangle *ejtehād* from court politics, warning against accepting the opinions of Karaki and his grandson, Mir Sayyed Ḥosayn, both of whom took on the title "seals of *mojtaheds*." Ḥosayn held steadfastly to the idea of a pluralism of



authority, reflected in the rationalist renewal of legal rulings and a rejection of the opinions of dead *mojtaheds*. Indirectly, Ḥosayn's support for the renewal of Shi'ite law validated the position of the Persian notables who opposed Karaki's assumption of supreme *ejtehād*. More importantly, however, Ḥosayn resisted attempts by the Safavid sovereign to control questions of clerical leadership or to designate a "seal" of *mojtaheds*. Ultimately, he hoped to promote the autonomy of the jurists and high-ranking ulama in deciding such matters and defending them from court politics.

Safavid scholars have debated the motives for the favorable approach of Shah Esmā'il II toward Sunnism, assigning various psychological, political, and economic motives for it. They have accepted, for the most part, the court historians' claims, based on accusations by the Qezelbāš and ulama, according to which Shah Esmā'il II attempted to eliminate Twelver Shi'ism as the official "state religion." A close examination of these accusations, however, shows that Shah Esmā'il II, for political expediency, aimed to suppress extreme anti-Sunnite rituals, particularly cursing, as a way to normalize Sunnism as one of many Islamic expressions in Persia. He did not truly attempt to uproot Twelver Shi'ism, but rather to perpetuate conciliatory approaches toward Sunnism. After all, in the post-Il-khanid and the early Safavid periods, a fluid exchange between Sunnism and Shi'ism (in their various forms) ensued. Ḥosayn Mojtahed, Karaki's grandson and the main 'Āmeli scholar who, in alliance with the Qezelbāš, led the opposition against Shah Esmā'il II, supported ritual cursing of the first three caliphs, Abu Bakr, 'Omar, and 'Oṭmān, who are considered as rightly guided (*rāšedun*) by the Sunnites, as an essential tool for "being truly Shi'ite" and for solidifying a distinctive identity and memory for Twelver Shi'ites as separate from that of Sunnites.

Under Shah 'Abbās I, the social and ethnic composition of the military and the administrative staff underwent fundamental changes, mainly due to a systematic replacement of Qezelbāš leaders with Circassian and Georgian slave soldiery (*ḡolāms*, q.v.). Safavid society was arguably shaped by forced migration and the depopulation policies in the face of Ottoman military expansion in the west and Uzbek opposition in the east. More extensively than his predecessors, Shah 'Abbās used depopulation and a scorched earth policy to prevent Ottoman occupation of frontier regions and cities. One would also add forced conversion of frontier populations, particularly Christians, to Islam.

As new Christian regions and groups came under Safavid control, thorny legal



issues about Muslim-Christian relations surfaced. During one of 'Abbās's court assemblies, the Ottoman envoy criticized the shah for prohibiting the consumption of meat from animals slaughtered by Christians and Jews, pointing to a long-established Sunnite tradition proclaiming the consumption of such meat licit. Shah 'Abbās then ushered in Shaikh Bahā'-al-Din 'Āmeli (Shaikh Bahā'i) to elucidate, from a Shi'ite legal viewpoint, the sovereign's support for such prohibition. In eighteen legal questions that Shah 'Abbās put forth to Bahā'-al-Din, he seemed particularly concerned with providing a clear legal framework for the social and economic exchanges among Muslims and Christians. On another occasion, Bahā'-al-Din ruled that it was impermissible to destroy a church that functioned as a mosque in the "land of infidels" or even to interrupt its activities and source of funding. The church, Bahā'-al-Din argued, cannot become any person's property. It is possible that such views reflected Shah 'Abbās' hope to promote social integration in depopulated areas, particularly those with a Christian majority. Jean Chardin (q.v.), a French traveler, noted that a strict observation of purity rituals among Muslims was a clear hindrance to traveling abroad to engage in trade with Europeans, because theoretically the *šari'a* prohibited the consumption of meat or the wearing of clothes made by non-Muslims and, in extreme cases, coming in direct touch with them (Chardin, p. 281). Bahā'-al-Din's rulings, however, showed that in reality, when the need arose, there were ways to work around such laws. For instance, he expounded the unique conditions under which it is possible to consider grape syrup, honey, or vinegar to be religiously pure, if offered to a Muslim by a Georgian Christian.

High-ranking theologians like Bahā'i and Mir(-e) Dāmād expressed a keen interest in scientific and philosophical thought. They also appropriated traditions of 'high' Sufism even while popular Sufi practices and heterodoxy were suppressed. Shah 'Abbās welcomed this elitist eclecticism as long as it promoted outward conformity to the political order. On his part, Mir Dāmād supported his philosophical arguments by statements in the Qur'an and Hadith. In the fourth *qabas* (lit. firebrand) of his book *Qabasāt*, for instance, he referred to the Qur'an and the statements of Shi'ite scholars and Imams, noting that philosophy is not an independent or superior method for knowing God, but rather a supplemental and exegetical one.

Mir Dāmād advocated a hierarchy of consciousness and gradations of knowledge and emphasized the necessity for humans to be ruled by those who are more knowledgeable and able. What society labels 'evil' in reference to



injustice or adultery, he wrote, was constructed and as such has no absolute reality. Evil then describes the person who is lacking in justice, uprightness, or goodness, or it simply describes the standpoint of civic political law (*al-siāsa al-madaniya*) whose order is disrupted due to such imperfection. Mir Dāmād suggested that it was necessary for humans to fear divine retribution against “abominable acts,” that is, acts held to be abominable by legal experts and the disciplining state (Mir Dāmād, *Qabasāt*, pp. 437, 440-41).

Shaikh Loṭf-Allāh Maysi, another scholar of ‘Āmeli background, gained wide acclaim under the patronage of ‘Abbās I. His treatise on spiritual seclusion became an occasion for him not only to establish his credibility as a court *mojtahed* but also to confirm the shah’s authority in Isfahan’s refashioned public space known as the Meydan-e Naqš-e Jahān. The debate over the congregational qualities of the Loṭf-Allāh Mosque, or their lack thereof, brought to the fore the social struggle between the old Isfahani business elite of Meydān-e Hārūn-e Welāyāt and the shah’s rivaling and authoritative new business center, the Meydān.

As the impetus for conversion to Shi‘ism weakened by the 17th-century, Sunnite-Shi‘ite polemical confrontations between Safavid and Ottoman scholars lost much steam. Shah Ṣafi I (r. 1629-42) and Shah ‘Abbās II (r. 1642-66) cut off the economic grants of leading legal rationalists, *mojtaheds*, and replaced the latter with another branch of the Persian clerical elite, which promoted *aḵbāri* approaches (see above).

When scholars of a Sufi or a philosophical bent joined the clerical ranks and were welcomed by the Safavid court, conventional jurists bemoaned the monarch’s retreat from the sacred Shi‘ite law of his ancestors. Behind their attacks on the Safavids’ moral laxity and supposed hypocrisy, lurked the *mojtaheds*’ anger at being displaced by such scholarly hybrids who proved politically useful to the Safavid sovereigns of the late 17th century.

Overall, the clerics of ‘Āmeli background honored their alliance with the temporal rulers, fitting a *šari‘a*-guided sociopolitical order to Safavid sovereignty despite their inclination to achieve a measure of autonomy from the state. Gradually, clerical Shi‘ism, advocated by the émigré ‘Āmelis, found eager followers not only among a learned Persian elite, but also among the populace, giving way to a distinct and multifaceted form of Twelver Shi‘ism.



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