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KHALESI (Kāleši), **MAHDI** b. Ḥosayn Kāzemi (کمالی کزیمی, b. Karḳ, Iraq, ca. 1276/1860; d. Mashhad, 12 Ramaẓān 1343/6 April 1925), a leading, outspoken, Kāzemayn-based Shi'ite jurist, whose close involvement in anti-British politics and opposition to British occupation in Iraq resulted in his exile to Iran.

Born in the Shi'ite quarter of Karḳ near Kāzemayn in 1859-60 or 1861 to a family of scholars that hailed originally from Kāleš (east of Baghdad), Khalesi was initially educated by his father, Ḥosayn Kāzemi (d. 1894-95), and by Shaikh 'Abbās Jaššāni (d. 1888-89) before moving to the Shi'ite shrine cities (*'atabāt*). Although an Arab, Khalesi, like many other Shi'ite clerics residing at the time in Iraq, held Persian nationality (Allawi, p. 420; cf. Khadim, p. 194). In the Shi'ite shrine cities, Khalesi studied with some of the most renowned Shi'ite scholars of the age, including Mirzā Ḥabib-Allāh Rašti (1819-95), a leading mojtahed; Mirzā Moḥammad-Ḥasan Širāzi (1814-95), known as Mirzā-ye Širāzi and widely recognized as the supreme *marja' al-taqlid* (model of emulation) of the time, and Ākund Mollā Kāzem Ḳorāsāni (1839-1911), a leading proponent of the Persian [Constitutional Revolution](#). After Širāzi's death, Khalesi returned to [Kāzemayn](#) and established a religious school called *Madrasat al-Zahrā'*, which counted among its students Moḥammad-Fāzel Jamāli (d. 1997), the future prime minister of Iraq (1953-54), and the renowned bibliophile Šehāb-al-Din Mar'aši Najafi (d. 1990). The school was discontinued after Khalesi's death (Kāzemi, p. 273; cf. Šālehi, p. 37) but was later resurrected by his son, Moḥammad b. Moḥammad-Mahdi Khalesi, known as [Khalesizada](#) (Kālešizāda;



d. 1963), and transformed into an active religious institute known as Jāme‘at madinat al-‘elm (Brunner, pp. 272-73; Ende, 2007, p. 232). Khalesi soon became the head of the Shi‘ite community in Kāzmayn and an influential *marja‘ al-taqlid* (Sobhāni, XIV, p. 849). In Kāzmayn, he openly opposed the Bahā‘i religion and joined religious scholars (ulema) of Najaf in issuing a *fatwa* boycotting (*ḥokm-e taḥrim*) the newspaper *Lesān-al-‘Arab* for publishing articles in support of the nascent Iraqi Bahā‘i community (Farāhāni, I, p. 559).

Khalesi commenced his political activities in late 1911 by joining a number of fellow-*marāje‘* and lower-ranking clerics in Iraq in issuing fatwas for *jihād* against the Russian incursions in Iran and the Italian invasion of Libya. Three years later, soon after the outset of World War I, he joined other religious scholars in calling for *jihād* against the British in southern Iraq (Aṣḡari-nežād, p. 501; Rajabi, pp. 185, 387; Ende, 1981, pp. 66-67). In late November 1914, together with his son Khalesizada, Khalesi traveled from Kāzmayn to the southeastern Iraqi town of ‘Amāra and instigated believers gathered at the main mosque with a fiery sermon to consider it their religious duty to join Ottoman troops in fighting the British and, if necessary, sacrifice their lives in the path of *jihād*. Khalesi and his son fought British forces in the small southern Iraqi village of Qorna. The British summarily crushed the Iraqi fighters and forced them to retreat (Khalesi; Ḥasan Amin, II, p. 334). Khalesi and his son both survived the battle.

At the conclusion of World War I, Great Britain occupied Iraq as sanctioned by the League of Nations Mandate for Mesopotamia. Khalesi soon participated in clandestine meetings organized by Moḥammad-Taḡi Širāzi (known as Mirzā-ye Dovvom, d. 1920) to plot against the British occupation (Baḡšāyeši, p. 385). When Širāzi issued a fatwa in summer 1920 permitting the use of force to fight the British, Khalesi was among the first religious scholars to support the call for *jihād* and participated in the Iraqi revolt against the British that came to be known as the Great Iraqi Revolution of 1920 (Khadim, pp. 54-55). Thousands of Iraqis were killed as the British once again crushed the revolt in fall 1920. Khalesi subsequently returned to Kāzmayn and continued his political opposition from the pulpit, warning followers about the dangers of the British intrusion in Iraq. He also joined other scholars (*mojtahed*) in Iraq in opposing the Wahhābi attacks on southern Iraq in the early 1920s.

Following the failure of the revolution, the British established the Hashemite monarchy, nominated Fayṣal as the king of Iraq in 1921, instituted an Anglo-



Iraqi Treaty to replace the British Mandate, and called for parliamentary elections. Khalesi, who had previously expressed qualified allegiance (*bay'a*) to Fayṣal (Allawi, p. 375), rejected the Treaty and declared in 1922 that anyone who supported the elections was an enemy of God (Wardi, VI, p. 202; Kedourie, p. 150; Khadim, p. 155; Allawi, p. 417). The supreme *marja'* in Najaf, [Abu'l-Ḥasan Eṣfahāni](#) (d. 1946), together with Moḥammad-Ḥosayni Nā'ini (d. 1936), appear at first to have resisted issuing a fatwa against participating in the elections but were eventually convinced by the more firebrand Khalesi. Khalesi and other scholars in Kāzmayn then added their seals to the fatwa (Hairi, p. 130; Sluglett, p. 56; Baḳšāyeši, pp. 410, 430; Tripp, p. 36; Luizard, pp. 225-28; Zubaida, pp. 211-12; Allawi, p. 412). The same year, Khalesi, Eṣfahāni, and Nā'ini organized a massive protest demonstration in Karbala against the Treaty, attended by some 300,000 Iraqis and more than 2,500 tribal chiefs, who made a pact to stand against any forms of foreign intrusion (Hairi, p. 129; cf. Allawi, pp. 389-91).

As a consequence of his overt and subversive political and military activities, King Fayṣal was pressured by the British High Commissioner to order the Iraqi police to arrest Khalesi, who was viewed as the chief obstructionist among the Shi'ite ulema. In early summer 1923, British forces banished Khalesi's son to Iran and, soon after, deported Khalesi to the Ḥejāz (Kedouri, p. 150; Rajabi, p. 186; Khadim, pp. 157-58). Most of the clerics in Iraq objected to his exile in vain. After performing the pilgrimage to Mecca, he was invited to settle in Iran, where he is said to have received a hero's welcome (Baḳšāyeši, p. 410; Allawi, p. 422); he enjoyed his stays in Bushehr, Isfahan, and Qom (Modarres, II, p. 117). While in Qom, he met with Eṣfahāni and Nā'ini, who had left Iraq in protest Khalesi's exile (Aṣḡari-nežād, p. 509; Rajabi, p. 187); however, when Eṣfahāni and Nā'ini returned to Iraq in spring 1924, Khalesi chose to remain in Iran and criticized them for negotiating with the Iraqi government and acquiescing to Fayṣal's demand on avoiding political activism (Kedourie, p. 151).

To voice his disagreement with his fellow senior clerics, he left Qom and moved to Mashhad. Other sources indicate that the Iranian government ordered him to move to Mashhad, after European newspapers accused him of instigating the murder of the American consul Robert Imbrie, in which his son Khalesizada was implicated and for which he was arrested (Ḥosayni Āheq, p. 735, citing Moḥammad Qazvini's *Wafayāt-e mo'āṣerin*; Aḥmadi, p. 55). He engaged in teaching and continued his political activities through founding the



short-lived organization, Jam'iyat esteklāš al-ḥaramayn al-šarifayn wa-bayn al-nahrayn (The Society for the Liberation of Mecca, Medina, and Mesopotamia). It appears that he also played a role in instigating attacks on Bahā'i citizens and their properties at this time (Fo'ādi Bošru'i, p. 191; Momen, pp. 150-51). Other clerics in Mashhad appear to have been displeased with certain provocative fatwas he issued and at one point publicly accused him of being a Bahā'i in an attempt to discredit him (Ašğari-nežād, p. 511-12; Ḥosayni Āheq, p. 735; Fo'ādi Bošru'i, pp. 189-90; Fāzel Māzandarāni, IX, pp. 40-41; Momen, pp. 150-51).

Nonetheless, when he died of a heart attack in the spring of 1925 (Dehḳodā; Ašğari-nežād, p. 512), his death was mourned throughout Iran and Iraq, Shi'ite seminaries were closed as a sign of respect (Šāleḥi, p. 37), and memorial gatherings were held in his honor at mosques in Kāžemayn and Baghdad for two successive months (Wardi, VI, pp. 251-53; Kāžemi, p. 274). It is reported that thousands of Shi'ite and Sunni Muslims in Iraq lamented his death with the chant, "O Pillar of Islam, Guardian of the Šari'a / You have orphaned us, Sunni and Shi'i" (Allawi, p. 597). Claims made in later hagiographical sources (e.g., Dabbāğ) that he was killed cannot be substantiated. The general consul of the Soviet Union in Khorasan officially expressed his sympathies over the "supreme calamity" (*mošibat-e 'oẓmā*) of his death, offered condolences "especially" to Khalesi's son, and closed all Russian entrepreneurial and financial institutions in Mashhad for two days out of respect (Šafā'i, pp. 107-13). Khalesi was survived by two sons, 'Ali, about whom little is known, and the aforementioned Khalesizada and his brother, Rāzi Khalesi (d. 1928), a prominent scholar in his own right (Amin 'Āmeli, VI, p. 444; Rajabi, p. 387; Ḥosayni Āheq, p. 736).

Khalesi authored over a dozen works, mostly on matters of Shi'ite jurisprudence, ten of which have been published in Baghdad and Mashhad. More significant among them are: (1) *Bayān tašḥif al-menḥa al-elāhiya 'an al-naftat al-šayṭāniya*, a three-volume response to an abridged Arabic translation of a Persian anti-Shi'ite polemical work by the Naqšbandi scholar, Šāh 'Abd-al-Aziz Dehlavi (d. 1824), sarcastically entitled *Ketāb al-toḥfat al-eṭnā 'ašariya* (A Gift to the Twelvers) and published widely in India in the early 19th cent (Āqā Bozorg Ṭehrāni, III, p. 177); (2) *Ḥāšia 'alā kefāyat al-oṣul*, (Baghdad, 1910), a commentary on his teacher Āḳund Ḳorāsāni's *Kefāyat al-oṣul*, one of the most famous and challenging works in the genre of the "roots of law" (*oṣul al-feqh*; Āqā Bozorg Ṭehrāni, VI, p. 188; XIV, p. 35); (3) *Ketāb al-jehād*, also known as *al-*



Hosām al-battār fi jehād al-koffār, his main work on the theory and principles of jihad, written during the uprising against the British and serialized in the Baghdadi paper *Ṣadā al-Eslām* in August-September 1915; (4) *Talkiṣ al-rasāʾel le-Mortazā Anṣāri*, a four-part abridgement of [Shaikh Mortazā Anṣāri](#)'s (d. 1864) treatises on *oṣul al-feqh*; (5) *al-Ṣariʿa al-samḥāʾ fi aḥkām sayyed al-anbiāʾ*, a collection of fatwas (Baghdad, 1920; Āqā Bozorg Ṭehrāni, IV, p. 186); and (6) *al-Qawaʿed al-feqhiya*, his final work, published in two volumes in 1925 about the rules and principles of Islamic jurisprudence (Āqā Bozorg Ṭehrāni, XVII, p. 188).

It has been suggested that, at a time when the future of Iraq was being decided, Khalesi's miscalculations adversely affected the fortunes of Iraqi Shi'ites for decades to come (Kedourie, p. 136). After Khalesi's exile, political opposition from the Shi'ite ulema of Iraq went into abeyance until the 1960s. As for Khalesi's impact on the politicization of twentieth century Iranian Shi'ism, it can be traced principally through the influence he exerted on his son [Khalesizada](#). The latter not only sought to emulate his father in serving as one of the most politically active Shi'ite clerics in Iran during the 1920s, but he also openly advocated the establishment of an Islamic government as early as 1938 (Ṣafāʾi, p. 108).

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