



KHORASAN XV. THE BABI- BAHA'I COMMUNITY IN KHORASAN

Khorasan, the largest province in the northeast of Iran, is of special significance in the history of the Babi-Bahai religions. The first convert to [Babism](#) (q.v.) and the provincial Babi leader in Khorasan was Mollā Moḥammad-Ḥosayn Bošru'i (q.v., 1814-49), a Shaikhi (see [SHAIKHISM](#)) from Bošrūya (in southern Khorasan). His influence on clergy, fellow Shaikhis, acquaintances, and relatives was considerable, which led Khorasan to have one of the largest and most active Babi communities in Iran during 1844-48 (A. Amanat, pp. 273, 369).

On Mollā Moḥammad-Ḥosayn Bošru'i's first visit to Mashhad in 1844, he created, in collaboration with Mollā Mirzā Moḥammad Bāqer Qā'eni, the first center for the Babi activities, known as the Bābiya. A small house belonging to Qā'eni in the neighborhood of Bālā Kīābān, it became a base for Mollā Moḥammad-Ḥosayn's teachings and a frequent gathering place of the Babi disciples in Khorasan. The main concentration of the Babis of Khorasan was in three areas. Central Khorasan in the area known as Qohestān, on the edge of the highlands that surround the Khorasan desert, and the triangle between Torbat-e Ḥaydariya, Bošrūya, and Qā'en contained the largest concentrations of Babis in Iran. Second, on the northwestern side of the borderlands of Māzandarān, particularly on the northern route to Khorasan in [Beštām](#) (q.v.),



Mayāmay, and Biārjomand, there were also sizable Babi communities. And, third, there were a number of converts in cities such as Mashhad, Sabzavār, and Nishapur (A. Amanat, pp. 273-74).

Notable in the early period was the conversion of a number of leading jurists (*mojtaheds*): Mollā Şādeq Moqaddas Kōrāsāni (q.v.), Mirzā Sayyed Aḥmad Azgāndi, Mollā Mirzā Moḥammad Bāqer Qā'eni, Shaikh Aḥmad Mo'allem from Nāmeq, Ḥāji 'Abd-al-Majid from Nishapur, Mirzā Moḥammad Foruḡi, and other senior shaikhs, such as Mollā Kāleq Yazdi. These individuals preached the Babi faith openly and occasionally from mosques (A. Amanat, pp. 277-84; Fo'ādi Boşru'i, p. 72). The influence of Babi teachings spread to high-ranking officials, military personnel, and Qajar princes in Khorasan.

One of the possible reasons for the success of the Babi movement (see [BABISM](#) i.) in Khorasan was its heterodox background with notable Isma'ili (see [ISMA'ILISM](#)), Shaikhi and Sunni converts, and places where the influence of theologians (*'olamā'*) and *oşuli* jurists (*mojtaheds*) was reduced, and anti-Babi incitement often ignored. Non-Bahai sources report a wider heterodoxy. In 1844, the Jewish Christian missionary, Joseph Wolff (1795-1862), on his way to Bukhara, noticed that many people in Mashhad requested copies of the Bible, and he was invited to an open discussion with a local cleric (A. Amanat, pp. 275-76). Travelogues of Khorasan in the mid-1870s describe non-adherence to strict Islamic laws and non-observance of the traditional fasting rules in Ṭabas and Boşruya (E'teşām-al-Molk, p. 266).

Women played a significant role in the early Babi communities. Mollā Moḥammad-Ḥosayn Boşru'i's sister, Bibi Kuçak, held meetings for both sexes in Mashhad, which led to conversions (Arbāb, p. 49). His mother and sisters, and Qā'eni's wife and female relatives, were reportedly knowledgeable in Islamic studies (Fo'ādi Boşru'i, pp. 346-48).

During the early period of Babism, six of the first eighteen individuals who accepted the Bāb's claim and were given the honorific title of Ḥoruf-al-Ḥayy ("Letters of the Living") were from Khorasan. In addition, a group of Babis in 1848 began a march to Māzandarān from Khorasan, carrying the Black Standard foretold in Islamic traditions (Ḍabiḥi-Moqaddam, pp. 39-41). In Ḥeşār and Nāmeq, after hearing Mollā Ḥosayn's address in the mosque, all the students of Mojtahed Mollā Aḥmad joined the movement, and in Boşruya about forty people did so. Overall, around a third of those on the march and those killed in the subsequent battle at the shrine of Shaikh Abu 'Ali Fażl



Ṭabarsi were from Khorasan. Some Babis escaped death, including Mirzā Moḥammad Foruḡi and Mollā Ṣādeq Moqaddas, whose accounts of the battle at the shrine of Shaikh Ṭabarsi were included in [Nabil-e A'zam Zarandi's](#) (q.v.) early chronicle of Babi history. In Mashhad, in particular, and in Bošruya, Babis were persecuted (Barāqi, pp. 192-93). Persecutions intensified following the Bāb's execution in 1850 and an unsuccessful attempt on Nāṣer-al-Din Shah's life in 1852 by a very small Babi group.

After the execution of the Bāb, the Babis continued their propagation activities when restrictions were lifted. In 1858, [Āqā Moḥammad Qā'eni Nabil-e Akbar](#) (q.v.) arrived in Khorasan and succeeded in converting some 150 people in Qā'enāt, some of whom proselytized further (Āyati, pp. 281-82). In Tun (present-day [Ferdows](#), q.v.), a city located south of Mashhad, the descendants of the Sufi master Šāh Ne'mat-Allāh Wali converted, and the town subsequently became a center for Bahai activities (Fo'ādi Bošru'i, pp. 302-6; Momen, 2015, pp. 206-7). Šojā-al-Dawla, governor of Qučān, and some Sabzavār cavalries and theologians in Nishapur and Sabzavār, also converted to Babism. Mirzā Moḥammad-Rezā Mo'tamen-al-Salṭana also converted and rose in local government to become minister of finance and vizier of Khorasan during Nāṣer-al-Din Shah's reign (Fo'ādi Bošru'i, p. 95; Balyuzi, pp. 52-54). This widespread network of support led to a relative tolerance toward Babis in this period (Fo'ādi Bošru'i, pp. 93-94).

In 1866-67, Mollā Moḥammad Nabil-e A'zam Zarandi informed the Babi community of the claim of [Bahā'-Allāh](#) (q.v.), and the vast majority converted to [Bahatism](#) (q.v.). The foundations were laid by prominent Babis such as Moqaddas and Nabil-e Akbar and by Babis visiting Bahā'-Allāh in Baghdad. No records of [Azali Babism](#) (q.v.) communities in Khorasan exist.

During this period, persecution from regional governors started, including from Ḥešmat-al-Molk Amir 'Alam Kān 'Alam of Qā'enāt, who extorted large amounts of money and land from Bahais (Fo'ādi Bošru'i, p. 372-82). The first Bahai martyr in Khorasan was Ḥāji 'Abd-al-Majid Nišāburi (Abā Badi') in 1877. His death sentence was instigated by Shaikh Bāqer Mojtahed from Isfahan, despite resistance from the governor of Mashhad, Rokn-al-Dawla, the brother of the king, and other officials (Fo'ādi Bošru'i, p. 156; Ešrāq Kāvāri, pp. 687-99).

The Bahai community of Khorasan expanded during Bahā'-Allāh's lifetime. Prince Ḥāji Šayḡ-al-Ra'is, grandson of [Faṭḥ-'Ali Shah Qajar](#) (q.v., r. 1797-1834), and a prominent figure in the reform movement of Iran, whose mother was a



convert, promoted the Bahai movement openly (Fo'ādi Bošru'i, p. 145; Momen, 2015, pp. 128-31).

A notable female Bahai was Ruḥāniya Bošru'i, whose apologetic essays (*Resāla*) impressed some theologians (Fo'ādi Bošru'i, pp. 350-52). Mirzā Kānlar Kān E'tešām-al-Molk (first secretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs) records that, in his journey to Khorasan, he travelled to Bošruya to meet with her and noted her erudition around 1876-78 (pp. 252-56). From 1880, in Mashhad and Torbat-e Ḥaydariya, Iranian Jews converted to the Bahai Faith and, by the 1890s, there were sixty such converts in Mashhad (M. Amanat, p. 12).

Under the leadership of 'Abd-al-Bahā' (q.v.), there was some dissension in the community of Kūsf, in southern Khorasan, due to the influence of his brother Mirzā Moḥammad-'Ali, which was unsuccessful (Fo'ādi Bošru'i, pp. 79-80). Bursts of heavy persecution ensued, especially after the assassination of Nāšer-al-Din Shah in 1896, as people suspected Bahais (based on the previous Babi attempt). In Torbat-e Ḥaydariya, five innocent Bahais were imprisoned and killed by a mob on their release. This shocked foreign officials, who were concerned that steps were not taken to identify and punish the perpetrators (Momen, 1981, pp. 405-17). In Nāmeq and Ḥešār, Bahais were attacked, imprisoned, and some killed, including women, children, and the elderly. Local clergy mostly instigated this and continued to do so until the end of the Qajar period (Fo'ādi Bošru'i, pp. 261-62).

The response to this persecution changed from quiet acceptance to lobbying for protection after the murder of Ḥāji Moḥammad Tork (also known as Tabrizi) in 1898. He was dragged from his house, tortured, and burned to death on the main street of Mashhad. The British minister in Tehran at the time, [Charles Hardinge](#) (q.v.), wrote to the prime minister Mirzā 'Ali Khan [Amin-al-Dawla](#) (q.v.), questioning him about this public act and the lenient punishment of the murderers (Momen, 1981, pp. 406-17). In Bošruya, Bahais were heavily persecuted, and the house of Mollā Moḥammad-Ḥosayn Bošru'i was destroyed. In 1915, when Shaikh 'Ali-Akbar Qučāni was killed and the nineteen-year-old Mašiyat-Allāh tortured to death, local Bahais sent a formal protest to [Aḥmad Shah Qajar](#) (q.v., r. 1909-25), the Majles, government ministers, and the local governors (Fo'ādi Bošru'i, pp. 159-65). The continued persecution led to an exodus to Ashkabad and surrounding Russian-held territories from 1900 to the 1920s (Fo'ādi Bošru'i, p. 355).

After realizing that the government was reluctant to persecute Bahais, the



clergy used indirect methods. They instigated a campaign of labeling Bahais as enemies of Islam, and accused them of political crimes and espionage, particularly during the Constitutional Revolution (q.v.). Later confiscation of properties and assets of Babis on spurious grounds was common (Fo'ādi Bošru'i, pp. 137-38).

Bahā'-Allāh allowed Bahai institutions to be established in Khorasan before other provinces in Iran. The first administrative body, *Maḥfel-e Ruḥāni* (q.v.), "Spiritual Assembly" of Khorasan was elected in Mashhad in 1905. It met five nights a week and regularly communicated with local Bahais. These meetings were first held in Bābiya until a permanent Bahai center was purchased in Sar Āb. In 1907, *Percy Sykes* (q.v.) reported that there were 200 Bahais in Mashhad (Momen, 1981, p. 418). By 1927, there were 30 local assemblies and 65 localities registered.

The Bahais of Khorasan made some notable contributions to the wider society. Many schools were established. In Mashhad, Moḥammad-'Ali Toršizi, known as "Modir," set up the first modern-style educational institution with 100 students in 1913. However, it was forced to close in 1914 when students were attacked by members of a neighboring theological college. Toršizi opened another school the following year called Hemmat, with student numbers reaching 400. It led to other schools opening in Torbat-e Ḥaydariya, Toršiz, *Darragaz* (q.v.), Qučān and Marv. Despite having Bahai teachers, some of these were not formally Bahai schools but rather were based on a modern curriculum (Fo'ādi Bošru'i, pp. 140-41). Toward the end of Moẓaffar-al-Din Shah's reign, Toršizi and two others purchased a printing press and from 1906-9 published two newspapers, *Bešārāt* (q.v.) and *Ṭus* in Mashhad (Fo'ādi Bošru'i, p. 141). In 1925, one of the leading Bahais of Mashhad, Mirzā 'Ali Khan Golkani brought out a *Sāl-nāma-ye Bahā'iān dar Ḳorāsān* ("Yearbook of the Bahais of Khorasan"). It continued for three years and later changed into a magazine call *Badi'* (Fo'ādi Bošru'i, p. 218; Momen, 2015, pp. 144-45). *Našriya Erz-e K ā* was another magazine published locally until the 1970s.

During 1922-24, anti-Bahai activities increased, which coincided with the formation of the *Ḥojjatiya* (q.v.) in Mashhad, after Sayyed 'Abbās 'Alawi, a colleague of its founder, had converted to Bahaism. There was a range of persecutions, including insulting an effigy of 'Abd-al-Bahā' in Mashhad, widespread attacks on individuals, and a plan for a pogrom. Bahai petitions were refused by the postal office in Mashhad (Fo'ādi Bošru'i, pp. 189-90, 207).



During the reign of Reżā Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925-41), Bahai communities were treated in a similar way to other religious minorities (Vahman, p. 44). However, in 1934, branches of Tarbiat and other Bahai-run schools were closed by order of the government. During the reign of Moḥammad-Reżā Shah Pahlavi (r. 1941-79), Bahais enjoyed many religious freedoms but lacked some civil rights and the right to marry according to Bahai law. There was a brief period of persecution in 1955, following radio broadcasts by Ḥojjat-al Eslām Falsafi (Vahman, pp. 136-37).

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, conditions for Bahais in Khorasan, as in other parts of Iran, have worsened. Bahais' civil rights have been restricted; their institutions disbanded; some Bahais dismissed from their employment; Bahai properties confiscated, looted, or burned; pensions for Bahais stopped; admission of Bahais to universities denied; and some Bahais have emigrated to other countries. There remains a Bahai community in most towns and cities of Khorasan, but the overall size and distribution is not known.

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