



MARTYRS, BABI

MARTYRS, BABI (Bābi), adherents of the Babi religion who were killed for their faith (see [BABISM](#)) during the period up to about 1866 when the [Bahai faith](#) emerged. Bahai martyrs are not included here although Bahais were commonly called 'Bābis' until the middle of the 20th century.

Instances. The challenging and heterodox nature of the Bāb's (see [BĀB](#), [SAYYED 'ALI-MOḤAMMAD ŠIRĀZI](#)) claims provoked opposition on the part of the Shi'ite establishment, which then led the civil authorities of Qajar Persia to intervene on the side of the clerics. Thus, whilst no Babis are known to have been executed for their faith during the first three-and-a-half years of the movement's existence (May 1844-late 1847), several Bābi missionaries were beaten or otherwise persecuted for their activities, as with the arrest and trial before a joint Sunni-Shi'ite religious tribunal of one of the Bāb's disciples (Mollā 'Ali Bastāmi) in Ottoman Iraq in January 1845, leading to his being condemned to work in the naval dockyards in Istanbul where he soon died (Wardi, 1969-74, pp. 138-40; Amanat, 1989, pp. 211-37; Balyuzi, 1973, pp. 48-57; Hamadāni, p. 401; 'Abd-al-Bahā', pp. 248-49; Momen, 1981, pp. 83-90; Idem, 1982; Nabil, 1932, pp. 87-92), and the public humiliation and torture of two other disciples of the Bāb in Shiraz in mid-1845 (Hamadāni, p. 200-02; Momen, 1981, pp. 4, 69-70; Nabil, pp. 144-48).

The first known killings of Babis followed the murder of the prominent Qazvini cleric Ḥāji Mollā [Moḥammad-Taḳi Baraḡāni](#), the uncle and father-in-law of the Babi leader Ṭāhera (Qorrat-al-'Ayn), and a leading opponent of both the Shaikhis and the Babis (October 1847). Although the murderer was at that



time a Shaikhi, Ṭāhera and her followers in the city were blamed, and several were arrested, one being formally executed, and several others being done to death by Baraḡāni's supporters (Sepehr, 1998, III, pp. 997-98; Wardi, 1969-74, pp. 152-90; Samandar, pp. 80-83, 92-93, 110-14, 356-64; Amanat, 1989, pp. 316-24; Hamadāni, pp. 274-81, 403-04; Momen, 2003; Nabil, 1932, pp. 273-83). From this point onwards, attacks against the Bābis by leading clerics and their followers became more common and some Babis began to carry weapons. One such confrontation occurred at Bārforuš in Māzandarān, involving the killing of several Babis and their opponents, and leading directly to the armed conflict between the Babis and their enemies at the nearby shrine of Shaikh Ṭabarsi (October 1848-May 1849).

The Ṭabarsi confrontation was a key event in Babi history. Linked both to the more radical and uncompromising religious stance now adopted by the Babis (the Bāb had publicly proclaimed himself to be the Mahdi, or the Shi'ite expected saviour, in the summer of 1848), and the struggle for clerical leadership in Bārforuš, it rapidly escalated into a major conflict in which local and later national military units besieged several hundred (perhaps eventually about 600) Babis in the now fortified shrine, and the Babi defenders sallied out to attack the besiegers. Many of the Babis were killed in the fighting and the remainder were deceived into leaving the fort and then massacred, but large numbers of the besiegers were also killed, the event thus marking the solidification of the widening perception of the Babis as dangerous insurgents. The Babi leader **Molla Moḡammed-ʿAli** of Bārforuš (known as “Qoddus”) was handed over to the leading local cleric, who had him tortured and killed in the main square of Bārforuš, before having his remains dismembered. The primary accounts for this episode from the government side are Sepehr (III, pp. 1010-36) and Hedāyat (pp. 421-22, 430-47). There are several Babi manuscript sources on this episode, by Sayyed Moḡammad Ḥosayn Mahjur Zavāraʿi, Ḥāji Nāṣer Qazvini, Loṭf-ʿAli Mirzā Širāzi and Mir Abu Ṭālib Šāhmīrzādi (see descriptions in MacEoin, 1992, pp. 161-63) and it is extensively covered in other works (Malek-Ḳosravi, I and II; Avāra, I pp. 131-86; Balyuzi, pp. 171-77; Kašāni, pp. 158-208; Browne, 1987, pp. 141-42; Hamadāni, pp. 44-110, 360-68, 404-10; ʿAbd-al-Bahā, pp. 35-39, 177-79, 189-90, 307-08; Momen, 1981, pp. 91-99; Nabil, pp. 324-68, 378-429; Zabihi-Mogaddam).

After the Ṭabarsi conflict, mere adherence to the Bāb could be sufficient to lead to a death sentence, as most famously in the case of the “Seven Martyrs of Tehran,” a group of seven prominent Babis who were executed in public by



beheading in February 1850. Comprising three merchants (including a maternal uncle of the Bāb), two clerics, a leading dervish and a government official, the seven were all men of high social rank who could easily have saved their lives by seeming to deny their faith, but chose not to do so (Et'ezād-al-Salātana, pp. 95-106; Balyuzi, pp. 182-85, 206-08; Kāšāni, 1910, pp. 215-22; Hamadāni, pp. 250-68, 369-70, 410; 'Abd-al-Bahā', pp. 211-17; Momen, 1981, pp. 100-05; Nabil, pp. 442-58, 462-63).

There then followed two major conflicts between the Babis and their opponents in the towns of Zanjān (ca. May 13, 1850-ca. January 2, 1851) and Nayriz (May 27- June 21, 1850) respectively in the north and south of Persia, as well as a more limited confrontation in Yazd (January-February 1850). At Zanjān, one of the leading clerics, Mollā Moḥammad-'Ali Ḥojjat, had become a Babi, bringing several thousand of his followers into the new religion. An inter-communal conflict developed, which led to the city governor ordering the physical division of the town into Babi and non-Babi sections. Fighting ensued, followed by the employment of troops and an almost nine month siege of the Babi quarter, during which the poorly armed defenders held off the besiegers, killing many. Many of the Babis were killed during the struggle and most of the survivors who fought to the end were massacred. The primary accounts of this event include, on the government side, Sepehr (III, pp. 1058-70), and Hedāyat (pp. 447-56). Primary Babi-Bahai accounts include manuscript histories by Mirzā Ḥosayn Zanjāni and Āqa 'Abd-al-Aḥad Zanjāni (the latter tr. in Browne, 1897; see also MacEoin, 1992, pp. 163-64). There are also accounts in many other sources (Āvāra, I, pp. 187-200; Balyuzi, pp. 185-88, 209-13; Kāšāni, 1910, pp. 230-38; Hamadāni, pp. 135-70, 371-73, 410-11; 'Abd-al-Bahā', pp. 179-81; Momen, 1981, pp. 114-27; Nabil, pp. 527-80; Walbridge).

The Nayriz conflict was similar to the Zanjān one, the arrival of a locally-influential religious leader [Sayyed Yaḥyā Darābi](#), known as "Waḥid," leading to the conversion of many of the townspeople and exacerbating existing urban tensions. Again, the local governor tried to settle matters by force, leading to an armed struggle between the Babis and regional troops. As in Zanjān, the Babis' religious fervour gave them an initial advantage over the forces sent against them and the besiegers' final victory was achieved by deceit, and was marked by the torture and killing of the Babi survivors. The government sources for this episode are Sepehr (1998, III, pp. 1105-10), Hedāyat (pp. 456-59) and Fasā'i (p. 304-05; tr. Busse pp. 290-94). Primary Babi-Bahai accounts are two manuscript histories by Moḥammad-Šafi' Ruḥāni and his son



Moḥammad-Ḥasan Ruḥāni, respectively (for the former's work see Ruḥāni). There are many other accounts (see for example, Āvāra, I, pp. 200-17; Balyuzi, pp. 178-82; Kāšāni, 1910, pp. 224-29; Hamadāni, pp. 117-31, 415-16; 'Abd-al-Bahā', pp. 183-84, 256-61; Momen, 1981, pp. 109-12; Nabil, pp. 475-99). The disturbances in Yazd also involved Sayyed Yaḥyā, but in this case, only a limited conflict: Waḥid forcibly resisted an attempt by the local governor to have him arrested and was then enabled to escape through the intervention of leader of the local ruffians (*luṭīs*), Moḥammad 'Abd-Allāh (Afšār, pp. 227-28; Balyuzi, pp. 204-05; Kāšāni, 1910, pp.223-24; Hamadāni, pp. 116-17; 'Abd-al-Bahā', pp. 255-56; Momen, 1981, pp. 106-09; Nabil, pp. 466-75).

Following the outbreak of these conflicts, [Amir Kabir](#) (1807-52), Nāṣer-al-Din Shah's (r. 1848-96) chief minister, determined to have the Bāb himself executed. Although clearly an act of state (Amir Kabir evidently hoped that the death of the Bāb would destroy the Babis' fervour), the execution was readily given religious legitimization by senior clerics in Tabriz and was carried out on the basis of their *fatwās* (on July 8 or 9, 1850; see Sepehr, 1998, III, pp. 498-99; Hedāyat, p. 456; Amanat, 1989, pp. 397-404; Hamadāni, pp. 298-307, 382-83, 411-13; Nabil, pp. 500-04, 518). One of the Bāb's disciples refused considerable blandishments to deny his master, and instead chose to die with him. Amir Kabir's expectations were disappointed, the Babis remaining defiant and firm in their faith after the execution (for examples see Momen, 1981, pp. 77, 78), a radical faction emerging in Tehran whose members sought revenge (Momen, 2004).

More Babis were killed in the aftermath of an unsuccessful attempt on the life of the shah by a small group of Babi radicals on August 15, 1852. The would-be assassins (either 3, 4 or 6 in number) were able to approach the shah in the guise of petitioners and then lightly wound him with pistol shot. One or two of the assailants were immediately killed by the shah's attendants, the survivors revealing that they were Babis seeking revenge for the execution of the Bāb. Panic ensued, and a number of Babis were arrested on the charge of being involved in a conspiracy to murder the shah. Some of those arrested were later released, but most were killed, including the radical leaders, Mollā Shaikh 'Ali Toršizi, known as "Aẓim," and Ḥosayn-Jān Milāni. Some other Babis, who were certainly not involved in any conspiracy, such as the poetess Ṭāhera, were also killed at this time. The Shah ordered a general massacre (*qatl-e 'amm*) of the Babis (Māzandarāni, VI, p. 71). The *Ruznāma-ye waqāye'-e ettefāqiya* (10 Du'l-Qa'da 1268/ August 26 1852, pp. 1-3, tr. in Momen, 1981, pp.



139-42) lists names 27 or 28 individuals (one may have been allowed to escape) who were killed, but another account refers to about 400 Babis being killed, and another to women and children as being amongst those killed (cited in Momen, 1981, pp. 134, 144-45). In order to lessen the possibility of a revenge attack by other Babis, the chief minister, *Mirzā Āqā Khan Nuri*, distributed many of those who were to be killed to various collective groups (branches of the military, royal pages, merchants, the teachers and students at the Dār al-Fonun polytechnic college in Tehran established in the previous year, etc.), so that they could share responsibility for the action. There seems to have been some competition in devising manners of death for those condemned, some being simply speared, stabbed or shot, whilst others were beaten to death, hacked to pieces, shot at with cross bows, or blown from the mouth of a cannon, and at least three suffered the torture of having lighted candles inserted in specially cut wounds in the torso whilst still alive, before being cut into sections. Prior to death, some had their eyes gauged out or were otherwise disfigured, and at least one was shod with horseshoes. After death, the bodies of many of the victims were cut up, used for target practice, beaten to an unrecognizable pulp, or left for the dogs to eat, indicating both the ferocity of the executioners and their determination that the dead should be denied a proper burial (the details of the executions were reported in the official government newspaper, *Ruznāma-ye vaqāye'-e ettifāqiya*, for 10 Dū'l-Qa'da, pp. 1-3, tr. Momen, 1981, pp. 138-42). Tāhera was executed, probably by being suffocated, and her body thrown down a well (Sepehr, 1998, III, pp. 552-58; Hedāyat, pp. 544-51; E'tezād-al-Salṭana, pp. 79-87; Amanat, 1997, pp. 204-18; Browne, 1918, pp. 267-71; Hamadāni, pp. 413-14; 'Abd-al-Bahā', pp. 313-14, 323-34; Momen, 1981, pp. 128-45; Nabil, 1932, pp. 599-601, 609-34, 636-37).

In the aftermath of the assassination attempt, there were also attacks on Babi villagers in Milān (near Tabriz) and Nur in Māzandarān, in both of which some Babis were killed (Hamadāni, pp. 414-15; Momen, 1981, pp. 145-46; Nabil, 1932, pp. 637-42). There was also a further upheaval in the town of Nayriz following the assassination of the town's governor by some Babis (March 26, 1853), the new governor using the incident as a pretext to pillage and plunder the town extensively, in response to which many people fled to the mountains, attacking the soldiery sent to subdue them. Eventually, resistance was overcome, about a hundred men being straightaway beheaded, others were imprisoned or eventually executed, whilst the women were given over to the soldiers, many eventually becoming beggars in Shiraz (Sepehr, 1998, III, pp. 1219-20; Hamadāni, pp. 415-16; Momen, 1981, pp. 147-51; Nabil, 1932, pp.



642-45).

The final persecution of Babis prior to the emergence of the Bahai religion as the main successor movement to the Babi movement took place in 1864, when a leading Shi'ite cleric of Isfahan, Shaikh Moḥammad-Bāqer, had about a dozen Babis arrested in the nearby town of Najafābād. The Babis suffered torture and beatings, but only four were eventually put to death, the rest being set free mainly because the shah decided that they had committed no crime (Momen, 1981, pp. 268-69). Almost all of those killed after 1864 as “Bābis” were in fact Bahais.

Numbers of those killed in the persecutions. It is unlikely that we will ever know exactly how many Babis were killed for their faith or for that matter how many Babis there were in total. One recent estimate places the total number of those killed at a little more than 3,000 at most (MacEoin, 1983), the majority linked to the three major confrontations at the Ṭabarsi shrine, Zanjān and Nayriz. It is possible that more Babis were killed, especially in 1852 without their names and deaths being recorded, but until further evidence comes to light, the number cited must serve as a base line. The standard Bahai estimate of those killed is 20,000 (Shoghi Effendi, p. 372). Almost all the named martyrs were men, but other victims would have included the widows, orphans and elderly dependents of those killed some of whom must have faced destitution and possible starvation. Again, at both Zanjān and Nayriz, a number of the wives and daughters of the Babi men were raped, some dying as a result of the afflictions they endured (Nabil, 1932, p. 645).

The concept of martyrdom. Few of the martyrs left any comments on their impending deaths, but it is obvious that most of them readily embraced death in the cause of their faith (see for example the letter of Mirzā Moḥammad-‘Ali Zonuzi, who was executed alongside the Bāb, in Hamadāni, pp. 302-03). There were Babis who slipped away from the great confrontations at the Ṭabarsi shrine, and at Zanjān and Nayriz, but there were many who stayed to fight to the end even after it must have become obvious that defeat and death were the likely outcomes. Again, in the case of the arrests and executions in Tehran, whilst there were individuals who chose to avoid death presumably by denying their faith, there were others who were completely resolute, most famously Solayman Khan, who walked, singing and reciting verses of poetry whilst suffering the candle torture (‘Abd-al-Bahā’, pp. 333-34; Nabil, pp. 617-20).



In understanding this steadfastness in the face of torment and death, it seems reasonable to assume that most of those who were killed shared the beliefs in the sufferings of the Imams, in particular the death of the [Imam Ḥosayn](#) at Karbalā', infusing their beliefs with a sense of the sacredness of heroic death in the cause of one's faith in the path of God (Amanat, 1989, p. 401; see also Momen, 2004; Walbridge). Thus, those who gave their lives as witnesses for the faith were seen as suffering a glorious death and would be recompensed by God, as exemplified by some of those killed in Tehran in 1852 who celebrated their own gory deaths as an assured means of gaining "the crown of martyrdom" (Dolgorukov, p. 23). Again, quite explicitly, the Babi defence at the Ṭabarsi shrine was seen as a re-enactment of the Karbalā' drama: these were God's saints battling against the forces of evil in the days of the Mahdi (Nabil, pp. 326, 343, 344). Similarly, those who died at Nayriz were compared to the sufferers at Karbalā' (Hamadāni, pp. 134, 416), and the demeaning treatment of Waḥid's corpse compared to that accorded the body of Imam Ḥosayn (Nabil, p. 494).

It is also of note that many of the deaths were given prophetic significance by the Babis at the time (as well as by their Bahai successors). Thus the "Seven Martyrs of Tehran" were seen as the "seven goats" of Islamic tradition who would walk before the promised *Qā'em* or Mahdi (see [MAHDI IN TWELVER SHI'ISM](#)) on the Day of Judgement (Hamadāni, pp. 267-68). Again, the parading of the heads of Babis killed at Nayriz was described as fulfilling a prophetic tradition that the holy saints who would appear at the time of the Mahdi would suffer abasement, and that the earth would be dyed with their blood and their heads exchanged as presents, whilst their womenfolk would wail and lament ('Abd-al-Bahā', p. 259).

Impact. The readiness of many Babis to face torture and death for their religious beliefs undoubtedly had a major impact in a society where the Karbalā' tradition was so strong. The readiness to die for one's religion could be readily taken as a "proof" of its potency and rightness. Certainly, several accounts state that the persecution and martyrdom of the Babis was a factor in increasing sympathy for them amongst the general population (Momen, 1981, pp. 102, 138, 145), and that it was a major factor in securing conversions to the new religion (Browne, 1918, p. 268; Momen, 1981, p. 103). Indeed, even some of the Babis' own opponents saw the Babi conflicts in terms of the Karbalā' motif of heroic martyrdom (Hamadāni, pp. 106-07). This said, it is also very likely that the public torture and killing of the Babis acted as a powerful



disincentive for conversion amongst the more faint-hearted as it was undoubtedly intended to be by those responsible for the killings.

Another consequence of the killings of Babis and of their persecutions and of the Babi upheavals was to bring the attention of Westerners to the new religion, both through diplomatic dispatches and in newspaper accounts and other published material (see Momen, 1981). The Babi martyrs also came to be seen as paradigmatic figures in the later Bahai faith, inspiring Bahais to endure their own persecutions including martyrdom. The Babis' courage, fortitude and self-sacrifice were also presented as qualities which the Bahais should emulate, notably in the teaching plans which formed such a marked feature of international Bahai activity from the 1930s onwards (Smith, 2002, pp. 118, 184, 271-72).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

'Abd-al-Bahā' ['Abbās Effendi], *Maqāla-ye šakṣi-e sayyāḥ*, ed., tr. Edward G. Browne as *A Traveller's Narrative, Written to Illustrate the Episode of the Bāb*, Cambridge, 1891; repr. Amsterdam, 1975.

Iraj Afšār, *Yazd-nāma*, I, Tehran, 1992.

Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844-1850*, Ithaca, N.Y., 1989.

Idem, *Pivot of the Universe: Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar and the Iranian Monarchy, 1831-1896*, Berkeley, Calif., and Washington, D.C., 1997.

'Abd-al-Hosayn Āvāra, *Kawākeb al-dorriya fī ma'āṭer al-bahā'īya*, 2 vols., Cairo, 1923.

Hasan Balyuzi, *The Bāb: The Herald of the Day of Days*, Oxford, 1973.

Edward Granville Browne, "Personal Reminiscences of the Bābi Insurrection at Zanjān in 1850, [...] by Āqā 'Abdu'l-A ḥad-i-Zanjāni," *JRAS* 29, 1897, pp. 761-827.



Idem, *Materials for the Study of the Bābi Religion*, Cambridge, 1918.

Idem, *Selections from the Writings of E. G. Browne on the Bābi and Bahā'i Religions*, Moojan Momen, ed., Oxford, 1987.

Prince Dimitrii Ivanovich Dolgorukov, "Excerpts from Dispatches Written During 1848-1852," ed. Firuz Kazemzadeh, *World Order* 1/1, Fall 1966, pp. 17-24.

'Aliqoli Mirzā Et'ezād-al-Salṭana, *Fetna-ye Bāb*, ed. 'Abd-al-Ḥosayn Navā'i, Tehran, 1972.

Fasā'i, *Fars-nāma-ye nāšeri*, ed. Tehran, 1961; tr. Busse. Mirzā Ḥosayn Hamadāni, *Tāriḳ-e jadid*, ed., tr. E. G. Browne as *The New History (Tāriḳh-i Jadid) of Mirzā 'Ali Muḥammad the Bāb, by Mirzā Ḥusayn of Hamadān*, Cambridge, 1893; repr. Amsterdam, 1975.

Hedāyat, *Rawzat al-ṣafā*, vol. X, Qom, 1960.

Ḥāji Mirzā Jāni Kāšāni, *Noḡtat al-kāf*, ed. E. G. Browne as *Kitāb-i nuḡtatu'l-kāf, being the Earliest History of the Bābīs*, E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Series 15, Leiden, 1910.

Denis MacEoin, "A Note on the Numbers of Babi and Baha'i Martyrs in Iran," *Baha'i Studies Bulletin* 2/2, 1983, pp. 84-88.

Idem, *The Sources for Early Bābi Doctrine and History: A Survey*, Leiden, 1992.

Asad-Allāh Fāzel Māzandarāni, *Zohur al-ḥaqq*, 9 vols., VI, MS in private collection.

Moḥammad-'Ali Malek-Ḳosravi, *Tāriḳ-e šohadā-ye amr*, 3 vols., Tehran, 1973, I and II.

Moojan Momen, *The Bābi and Bahā'i Religions, 1844-1944: Some Contemporary Western Accounts*, Oxford, 1981.

Idem, "The Trial of Mullā 'Ali Baštāmi: A Combined Sunni-Shi'i *fatwā* against the Bāb," *Iran* 20, 1982, pp. 113-43.

Idem, "Usuli, Akhbari, Shaykhi, Babi: The Tribulations of a Qazvin Family," *Iranian Studies* 36/3, 2003, pp. 317-37.



Idem, "Millennialism and Violence: The Attempted Assassination of Nasir al-Din Shah in 1852," paper (unpublished) presented at the 50th Anniversary Conference of the British Association for the Study of Religion, Harris Manchester College, University of Oxford, September 13-16, 2004.

Nabil, *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabil's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahā'i Revelation*, tr. Shoghi Effendi, Wilmette, Ill., 1932.

Moḥammad-Šafi' Ruḥāni, *Lama'āt al-anwār*, 2 vols. in 1, Bundoora, Victoria, Australia, 2002.

Šayḵ Kāẓem Samandar, *Tāriḳ-e Samandar wa molḥaqāt*, Tehran, 1974.

Mirzā Taqī Sepehr (Lesān-al-Molk), *Nāseḳ al-tawāriḳ: Tāriḳ-e qājāriya*, ed. Jamšid Kiānfar, 3 vols. in 2, Tehran, 1998.

Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By*, Wilmette, Ill., 1944.

Peter Smith, *A Concise Encyclopedia of the Bahā'i Faith*, 2nd ed., Oxford, 2002.

John Walbridge, "The Babi Uprising in Zanjan: Causes and Issues," *Iranian Studies* 29/3-4, 1996, pp. 339-62.

'Ali Wardi, *Lamaḥāt ejtemā'īya men ta'riḳ al-'Irāq al-hadiṯ*, 4 vols., Baghdad, 1969-74.

Siyamak Zabihi-Mogaddam, "The Babi-State Conflict at Shaykh Tabarsi," *Iranian Studies* 35/1-3, 2002, pp. 87-112.

(Peter Smith & Moojan Momen)

September 26, 2005