



## NICOLAS, ALPHONSE

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**NICOLAS, ALPHONSE** (or A.-L.-M. Nicolas, see below; b. Rasht, 27 March 1864, d. Paris, 28 February 1939, [Figure 1](#)), French diplomat and Orientalist.

Alphonse Nicolas was born on 27 March 1864 in Rasht (q.v.), where his father Jean-Baptiste Nicolas had just been named vice-consul. During his childhood, besides the French spoken at home, he also learned Persian and Russian. In 1873, when Jean-Baptiste Nicolas was appointed to the position of 1st dragoman at the French Legation in Tehran, the Nicolas family left Rasht to go to the capital. On September 30, 1874, Alphonse Nicolas was accepted as a student at the *École des Jeunes de Langues* with a scholarship (ADMAE, Classeur II. Promotions, MAE to J.-B. Nicolas, 2 October 1874) and went to Paris to continue his studies. In October 1875, when Nicolas was just eleven, his father died. His mother, Clotilde Bonnal, who had been living in Iran for more than twenty years, was very anxious that her son should continue his studies in France in order to later become a dragoman like his father. Consequently, after the death of her husband, she and her two daughters, Josephine and Augustine, both born in Persia, joined Alphonse Nicolas in France. He received a bachelor's degree on 24 November 1883. On 1 January 1884, he was accepted as a boarding student of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Ministère des affaires étrangères* [MAE]) at the School of Oriental Languages (*École des langues orientales*) in Paris to study Arabic, Persian and Turkish (ADMAE, Classeur II. Promotions, MAE to Mme. Nicolas, 30 November 1883). [Charles Schefer](#) was one of his professors. Nicolas graduated from this school in 1887. He began his diplomatic career on 12 August 1887 as a student-dragoman in Tehran



(ADMAE, Classeur II. Promotions, MAE to A. Nicolas, 10 August 1887). From then on, he took care of his mother and two sisters.

During the first year of his career as a diplomat, Nicolas, in parallel with his work as interpreter, made a study of the turquoise mines in Khorasan and wrote a report on it. He also examined the state of commerce in southern Iran in 1886-87. At the end of 1888, he passed the end-of-year exam, organized by Gaston Audibert, then 1st dragoman of the French Legation in Persia, and obtained a certificate (ADMAE, Classeur I. Notes des chefs de poste, certificate signed by G. Audibert, 30 December 1888). In 1889, Nicolas wrote a report on the salt lake near Qom as well as on the market for matches in Persia, addressed to the Quai d'Orsay. It was also in 1889, when he was twenty-five, that he began to study Babism (q.v.; Sanderson, p. 885).

Inspired by his father's criticisms and reflections on the work of Joseph Arthur Comte de Gobineau (q.v.), *Les Religions et les philosophies dans l'Asie centrale* (1865), which remains a fundamental source on Babism, Nicolas decided to study more seriously the life and doctrine of Sayyed 'Ali-Moḥammad Širāzi, the Bāb (q.v.). Together with a young Iranian follower of the Bāb, he began to read and translate the *Bayān* (q.v.), the Babi sacred text, which he published a few years later. After two or three years of study and reflection on the Babism, Nicolas became "little by little Bābi through and through" (Sanderson, p. 885). He also established contacts with Bābi circles (*maḥfel*) through an Iranian secretary of the French Legation in Tehran, a certain Mirzā Ebrāhim who himself was a follower of Bāb.

René de Balloy, then minister plenipotentiary of France in Tehran (1881-98), fully supported Nicolas in his activities. When in December 1889 a dispute arose between the latter and the chargé d'affaires, G. Paulze d'Ivoy de la Poype (stationed in Persia from 21 April 1889 to 30 April 1890), de Balloy supported his young interpreter and asked his ministry for the transfer of the chargé d'affaires (ADMAE, Classeur IV. Réserve, R. de Balloy to MAE, 14 May 1891).

At the end of the year 1890, Nicolas wrote a report for the Quai d'Orsay on the economic situation in Persia. He also assessed the feasibility of the road from Tehran to Moḥammara (see KHORRAMSHAHR) in another report. Impressed by the quality of these works, de Balloy asked his department on 19 January 1892 to promote Nicolas (ADMAE, Classeur I. Notes des chefs de poste, R. de Balloy to MAE, 19 January 1892]). Thus, on 9 December 1893, four years after his appointment as student-dragoman, the young diplomat became dragoman



2nd class in Tehran. A month later, on January 20, 1894 he received the Silver Medal of Honor (*la médaille d'honneur en argent*). This decoration was granted to him as the result of a special request by de Balloy, who specified in his letter to his ministry that Nicolas had contracted cholera (q.v.) on 4 September 1892, during the great cholera epidemic, while on duty and in the process of making an inventory of French nationals affected by it (ADMAE, Classeur I. Notes des chefs de poste, R. de Balloy to MAE, 23 January 1893). The silver Medal of Honor was thus granted to thank Alphonse Nicolas for his dedication in the service rendered to the Republic. However, the illness left his health in a fragile state and during the rest of his life he suffered from liver attacks.

On 26 July 1894, Nicolas was appointed dragoman-chancellor at Larnaca in Cyprus with an annual salary of 6,000 francs. Still single, he took care of his mother and his unmarried sister. His other sister, Augustine, had married F. M. Knobel, chargé d'affaires for the Netherlands in Tehran. During his stay of two years (1894-95) in Larnaca, he was in contact with Mirzā Yaḥyā Nuri Şobḥ-e Azal (1831-1912), one of the successors of the Bāb and founder of Azali Babism (q.v.).

From 2 December 1895 to 28 September 1896, Nicolas was in charge of the Tangier chancery in Morocco with an annual salary of 6,500 francs. After his service in Tangier, in the autumn of 1896, he went to Smyrna as 1st dragoman with an annual salary of 7,000 francs. Finally, on 10 October 1898, after he had been away from Persia for four years, he returned to his country of birth, but this time as the 1st dragoman of the French Legation in Tehran, a position with an annual salary of 10,000 francs.

Like his father, Nicolas was interested in Persian literature. As a result, he published *La divinité et le vin chez les poètes Persans* (1897) and a translation, *Quelques odes de Hâfiz* (1898). These two slim volumes, each about 60 pages long, were signed A.-L.-M. Nicolas. Nicolas usually went by the name Alphonse, and his full name was Alphonse Louis Daniel. The anomaly in the case of his published work, i.e. the use of the initials “A.-L.-M.” can be explained by material from the French diplomatic archives and more specifically in two personal files of the second series, no. 1127, in the name of Alphonse Louis Marie Nicolas. In each of these two files a hundred administrative documents are classified chronologically. They concern both Nicolas the father (Louis Jean-Baptiste) and Nicolas the son (Alphonse Louis Marie). We learn that at the birth of Nicolas, the son, his parents chose for him as first name “Alphonse”



and they also added, out of respect for his grandparents, the names, “Louis and Marie”. Alphonse Louis Marie Nicolas therefore chose as his signature, “A.-L.-M. Nicolas”. His dispatches are signed this way and his writings are also published under this name. According to a note in this file, in 1904 after his marriage, he modified his birth certificate and took the following names in this order: “Louis Alphonse Daniel”. There is no document in the file to explain why he made this modification. However, despite this rectification, Nicolas continued to use his previous signature for all his future administrative documents and his other publications.

On 19 September 1899, still in Tehran, Nicolas was promoted again and became dragoman first-class with the same annual salary. In 1902, he published his first work on Babism: a translation of the Bāb’s *Dalāyel-e sab‘a* as *Le Livre des Sept Preuves de la Mission du Bab*. A year later, he published an article concerning two Bābi manuscripts.

On October 18, 1904, Nicolas married a Belgian national, Céline Adèle Hubertine Vroonee. She lived with her mother and stepfather, Joseph Beckers, a justice of the peace. Less than a year after this marriage, on 16 July 1905, Nicolas’ first child was born in Teheran, a girl named Suzanne. It was also in that year that he published two new works on the subject of Babism: a monograph of 458 pages in two volumes titled *Seyyèd Ali Mohammed dit le Bāb*; and then a translation from Arabic into French of the sacred text of Babism, *Le Béyan*, which was published in 235 pages in Paris.

After observing the events in Tehran during the reign of Mozaffar-al-Din Shah (r. 1896-1907), which drove the shah to grant a constitution (see CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION), Nicolas witnessed the second phase of the Constitutional movement in Tabriz. He had been appointed as manager of the French consulate in Tabriz on 26 November 1906, with an annual salary of 15,000 francs, during the leave of Pierre-Abel Bergeron, consul 2nd class in Tabriz since 14 April 1897. For several reasons, Tabriz was of immense political and social significance: the capital of Azarbaijan; a border region in contact with the Caucasus and its revolutionary Social Democratic organizations, a venue for migrant Iranian workers; and on the other border a region in contact with the Ottoman Empire and the Iranian intellectuals resident there along with their compatriot merchants who had settled there for a much longer period. Consequently, as soon as he arrived in Tabriz, he began to inform his ministry in Paris directly of the events that were taking place in his jurisdiction, without going through the legation in Tehran. He



lived in Tabriz for ten years (1906-16), and his wife gave birth to their second child (Jean-Baptiste Arthur) there on 8 March 1908. He also advanced in his career as a diplomat and was promoted 2nd class on 30 January 1907, with an annual salary of 20,000 francs, then later as consul on 7 June 1907, and, finally, consul 1st class on 6 September 1913, with the same salary. In addition, he was made a Chevalier de la Légion d'honneur on 20 July 1909, and Officier d'Académie on 16 May 1913, for services rendered during these years. The stay in Tabriz also enabled him to witness the resistance of the constitutionalists in the city for many months against the despotic rule of Mohammad-'Ali Shah (r. 1907-1909) and the troops sent against them. Nicolas not only informed his ministry, but also published several articles on these events in the *Revue du monde musulman* in the form of a report, sometimes signed with the pseudonyms "Ghilan" or "Ghilân," "Rechti" or M. Rechti," and finally "Irani" or "Îrâni." He used these pseudonyms because as a diplomat he could not afford to be perceived as not being neutral with regard to the events taking place in Iran, and they allowed him to hide his identity and remain anonymous. These pseudonyms can be attributed to Nicolas, however, because of the similarities between the texts of these articles and Nicolas' diplomatic dispatches. In parallel with his diplomatic duties and his writings on various events of the Constitutional Revolution in Tabriz, he continued his research and publications on Babism. In 1907, he published an article entitled "Sur la volonté primitive et l'essence divine d'après le Bâb." Between 1910 and 1914, he published simultaneously in Paris his *Essai sur le Chéïkhisme* in four volumes and his translation in four volumes of the sacred text of the Babis under the title *Le Béyan persan*.

On 1 February 1916, Nicolas was appointed consul 1st class in Tiflis (Tbilisi). Due to the difficulties in communication during World War I, the news of the appointment did not reach him at once. This explains his presence, on 8 June 1916, at the inaugural ceremony of the Russian railway in Tabriz. He subsequently left Tabriz for Tiflis, where conditions were far from safe. On 26 May 1918, he was forced to evacuate Tiflis with the French colony and reached Moscow in fifty days. On 12 July 1918, he received orders to go as consul to Saratov. On his arrival, the Bolsheviks arrested him as a spy on two separate occasions (15 August and 11 September 1918). Finally, on 1 October 1918, he was expelled from Saratov and left Russia along with his family and went back to France via Finland, Sweden, and Great Britain. On 9 January 1920, Nicolas was appointed to the post of director of the consulate in Valencia, Spain, where he became consul on 22 July 1920 and finally consul general on 3



August 1920. After four years in this position, he retired from government office in March 1924 at the age of 60 (*Annuaire diplomatique...*, p. 278).

After retirement, Nicolas resumed his research and publications on Babism. In 1933, he first published a booklet of sixteen pages, *Qui est le successeur du Bâb?* and then an article, “Les béha’is et le Bâb.” The following year (1934), he published “Quelques Documents relatifs au Babisme.” In 1936, he published in Paris his two last works on Babism: a small book of 42 pages, *Massacres de Bâbis en Perse*, and an article under the title of “Le Bâb astronome.” Nicolas was one of the few Europeans who first made the Bâb and his religion known in the West. This admirer of the Bâb did not appreciate ‘Abd al-Bahā’ (q.v.) and his Baha’i followers who, according to Nicolas, had belittled the value and importance of the Bâb by making him a mere precursor of this new religion (Bibliothèque universitaire des langues et civilisations [BULAC], Fonds Nicolas, Correspondences, Nicolas to Edith L. Sanderson, 13 September 1935 and 5 April 1936). He remained therefore profoundly and singularly a devoted Babi.

On 7 February 1939, Edith Sanderson (1871-1955), one of the first Baha’is in France, interviewed Nicolas, who was then living in Paris. The account of this interview describes how Nicolas took an interest in the Bâb and his doctrine, with some brief remarks about the nature of some of his own works in the field of Babism. According to a note at the bottom of the first page of the text of this interview, shortly after this meeting with Edith Sanderson, Nicolas died in Paris at the age of 75 (Sanderson, p. 885). According to the archives of the city hall of the 16th arrondissement of Paris, “Louis Alphonse Daniel Nicolas, retired consul general of France, died February 28, 1939.”

Alphonse Nicolas (or A.-L.-M. Nicolas) had a rich life. He left behind books and articles not only on Bâb and Babism, but also on Persian literature and the events of the Constitutional Revolution in Persia. As Moojan Momen writes, “No European scholar has contributed so much to our knowledge of the life and teaching of the Bâb as Nicolas. His study of the life of the Bâb and his translations of several of the most important books of the Bâb remain of unsurpassed value” (Momen, ed., pp. 36-40). Nicolas also left hundreds of diplomatic dispatches kept today at the diplomatic archives of the Ministère des affaires étrangères in La Courneuve, north of Paris (ADMAE), and in a register at the Centre des Archives diplomatiques de Nantes (CADN), an original source for the revolution in Tabriz which was published by the present author in 2016.



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