



PESYĀN, MOḤAMMAD-TAQI KHAN

PESYĀN, MOḤAMMAD-TAQI KHAN (پسیان محمدتقی خان پسیانی، b. Tabriz, 1309/1892; d. Quchan, Şafar 1340/October 1920), military officer with strong nationalist sentiments who served in the Government **Gendarmerie** from its inception in 1912 until 1921, when he was killed in a skirmish by Kurdish tribal forces (Cronin, 1997a; idem, 2010).

He was born to Moḥammad-Bāqer Khan Pesyān and his wife Fāṭema Solṭān, into a prominent, apparently Amir Solaymāni Kurdish, family, who had emigrated from the Caucasus after Iran's defeat in the Russo-Persian War of 1826-28 and the incorporation of territories into the Russian Empire (Pesyān, pp. 26-27). Pesyān was educated at one of the modern schools established in Tabriz in the late 19th century (M.-T. Pesyān, pp. 27-28), when the city in general, and Pesyān's *mohājerin* (emigrant) community in particular, were receptive to the strong radical influences emanating from the Caucasus (Martin, pp. 44-62). Like many other such emigrants, Pesyān's family possessed strong military traditions, and in 1907, at the age of 15, he went to Tehran and entered the Military College. On the establishment of the Government Gendarmerie in 1912, he was offered and accepted a commission in the officer corps. By 1914 he had risen to the rank of major and was in command of the gendarmerie unit in Hamadan.

Although Iran declared its neutrality, during World War I, the country became



a battlefield for both the Great Powers and domestic political forces. It was in this period that Pesyān acquired a reputation as both an accomplished military commander and a democrat/nationalist sympathizer. In 1915, when nationalist forces left Tehran to establish an independent government in western Iran free from British and Russian control, gendarme officers organized a series of coups in the larger towns of southern and western Iran; Pesyān took control of Hamadan, and his cousins, ‘Aliqoli and Ġolām-Rezā Pesyān, of Shiraz (Cronin, 1997a, pp. 29-42).

After the defeat of the nationalist movement, Pesyān, both his cousins having committed suicide after the recapture of Shiraz by British-sponsored tribal forces, left Iran for Germany. In Berlin he continued his military training, first in the German air force and then in the infantry, and was awarded the Iron Cross. He also engaged in literary and cultural activities and wrote his memoirs, titled *Sargodašt-e yak javān-e waṭandust*, and an account of his experiences in western Iran during the war, *Jang-e moqaddas az Baġdād tā Irān* (Pesyān, pp. 33-35). He also became part of the émigré circle (Komita-ye melliyun-e Irāni dar Berlin) led by Ḥasan Taqizāda and grouped around the periodical *Kāva*, for which he sometimes wrote articles. In 1920, at the age of 28, he returned to Iran, with his military, political, and personal outlook having been profoundly shaped by his experiences during the war years. He resumed his position in the Gendarmerie with the rank of colonel and was appointed to command of the gendarmerie regiment in Mashhad (Pesyān, p. 36).

Two years earlier, the then prime minister Ḥasan Woṭuq-al-Dawla, as part of an effort by the government to restore its control after the chaos of the war, had established a new gendarmerie regiment in Mashhad. He had also appointed his brother, Aḥmad Qawām-al-Salṭana, as the governor-general of Khorasan. Mashhad had been the site of intense political conflict during the [constitutional](#) period, with the small Caucasian and Azeri communities at its center. Now the province, which bordered the former Russian Empire, where civil war still raged, continued to suffer from political uncertainty and military insecurity and was ravaged by a disastrous economic situation. In September 1920, Pesyān arrived in Mashhad to find his force disintegrating and a bitter feud in progress between Qawām-al-Salṭana and the Belgian Director of Revenues for Khorasan, Leon Dubois. Pesyān, his men unpaid for months, joined Dubois in blaming Qawām-al-Salṭana for the financial crisis in the province and openly accused him of misappropriating government money



(Pesyān, p. 38). From then on, the animosity between Pesyān and Qawām-al-Salṭana was to be an important factor driving the wider political conflict.

At this point the tense situation in Mashhad was subsumed into the national crisis, which broke out when Sayyed Żiā' and Reżā Khan (later Reżā Shah) carried out their coup in Tehran in February 1921. The coup leaders made sweeping arrests among the aristocracy and higher bureaucracy in the capital, intending to finance a program of reconstruction with the arrears of taxes forced from those arrested. Following the coup, gendarme officers assumed charge in a number of towns across the country. On 2 April, Colonel Pesyān, on the orders of the new government, took control of Mashhad, and, on the next day, he was appointed military governor-general of Khorasan by Sayyed Żiā' ("Riāsat-e wozarā' be Kolonel MoḤammad-Taqi Kān Pesyān," 14 Farvardin 1300, in Bayāt, docs. 1-2, pp. 51-52; Meshed Diary, no. 15, 9 April 1921, FO371/6420/E6384/88/34). Pesyān immediately arrested his enemy Qawām-al-Salṭana, who was taken under arrest to Tehran and imprisoned, and then arrested a large number of the local elite, apparently following the example of the coup-makers in Tehran.

Pesyān immediately began to consolidate his position ("E'lāmiya-ye Kolonel MoḤammad-Taqi Kān Pesyān, 15 Farvardin, 1300, in Bayāt, doc. 3, pp. 52-53; Meshed Diary no. 19, 7 May, 1921, FO371/6420/E8262/88/34). He expanded the Gendarmerie and, with Dubois' help, set up a finance commission to investigate the tax position of local notables, which assessed Qawām-al-Salṭana's arrears at enormous levels. Pesyān took another step, more audacious than anything done in Tehran, when, with another ally, the chief custodian (*motawalli-bāši*) of the Mashhad Shrine of the eighth Shi'ite Imam, he arrested the high officials of the Shrine, charging them with systematically misappropriating Shrine revenues (Meshed Diary, no. 16, 16 April 1921, FO371/6420/E6863/88/34; Meshed Diary no. 19, 7 May 1921, FO371/6420/E8262/88/34; Meshed Intelligence Summary, no. 20, 14 May 1921, FO248/1332.). During April and May, Pesyān also introduced a number of other minor reforms into the provincial administration. Signs of resistance to the tax collectors were, however, already becoming apparent, especially in the rural areas.

Sayyed Żiā's fall and exile, an apparent counter-coup, at the end of May brought about a crisis for the gendarme regime in Mashhad. All those arrested in Tehran after the coup were released, including Qawām-al-Salṭana, who immediately became the new prime minister. Pesyān was horrified by



Qawām-al-Salṭana's elevation and immediately began to consider armed resistance. Although the mutual hatred between Pesyān and Qawām-al-Salṭana was intense, on this occasion the government, facing an array of political and military problems throughout the country, balked at an open confrontation. On 2 June the government informed Pesyān that Mirzā Ṣadr Najd-al-Salṭana, a local notable, was to take over the post of governor-general, and he himself should remain in command of the military forces in Khorasan (Consul-General Meshed to Norman, Tehran, 3 June 1921, FO371/6405/E8263/2/34).

An uneasy temporary truce now prevailed in Mashhad, with Tehran's reluctant acquiescence. By July, the government's efforts to encourage tribal resistance to Pesyān, and especially to Dubois' revenue collectors, were becoming more overt and the situation in Mashhad more tense, leading to the resignation of the ineffective Najd-al-Salṭana. Thus Colonel Pesyān resumed full control in Mashhad. The government in Tehran, while continuing to incite the Khorasani tribal khans against him, adopted parallel political strategies, appointing a new governor-general, Najaf-qoli Ṣamsām-al-Salṭana Baḳtiāri, an unpopular move (M-T. Bahār, pp. 144-48; Bayāt, docs. nos. 5-8, 10, 14, pp. 54-64), and arranging for a deputation of senior gendarme officers to mediate. But the situation was rapidly polarizing, and an outbreak of tribal fighting in eastern Khorasan, and the now constant exhortations from Tehran to local khans and other leaders (M.-T. Bahār, pp. 151-52), led to a hardening of opinion among Pesyān's supporters. Pesyān also faced developing tribal opposition in the north of Khorasan, especially from Sardār Mo'azzaz Bojnurdi and his Kurd and Turkman tribal followers.

Pesyān also adopted a variety of measures to bolster local support. Rather than confronting the Shrine establishment, as previously, he tried to cultivate clerical opinion. He ordered a reduction in the price of bread, carried out propaganda activities in Mashhad and in the rural areas, and encouraged the loyalty of both the officers and the rank and file of the Gendarmerie. His increasingly radicalized supporters organized themselves into a society called *Komita-ye melli-e Ḳorāsān*, which now came to dominate political life in Mashhad (Bayāt, doc. no. 126, pp. 190-92). Evening entertainments and public meetings were held to raise money; the chief star of the entertainments was the poet 'Āref Qazvini Meshed Intelligence Summary, 10 September 1921, FO371/6420/E13787/88/34). The atmosphere in the city was by now violently anti-British; the British were widely believed to be using their influence



among the tribes to collude with the government in bringing about Pesyān's overthrow.

During September, Mashhad appeared to remain under the control of the gendarme regime. Yet money was extremely short, tax collections had intensified, desertions from the gendarmerie were growing, and the colonel was constantly engaged in operations against tribal forces in the east of the province (Bayāt, passim). The Khorasani countryside was seething with resentment, the Mashhad regime was overstretched and beginning to experience serious difficulties in meeting the tribal challenge.

The final blow came when a revolt of the Kurds to the north of Mashhad, in the areas of [Bojnurd](#), Shirvan (Širvān), and Quchan (Qučān), broke out at the end of September. The revolt was led by Sardār Mo'azzaz Bojnurdi and other frontier Kurd khans, acting under the direct orders of Qawām-al-Saltāna. This augured the end of the gendarme regime. Pesyān, with a small force, advanced towards the Kurd positions, but he was killed in an engagement on 3 October 1921 (30 Moḥarram 1340); the Kurds cut off his head (Šākeri, pp. 122-26; M.-T. Bahār, pp. 152-56; Meshed I. S. no. 41, 8 October, 1921, FO371/6420/E13787/88/34). 'Āref expressed his grief on Pesyān's death in a song titled "Gerya kon," performed by celebrated vocalists such as Qamar-al-Moluk Waziri and Ġolām-Ḥosayn Banān, as well as by 'Āref himself (Kāleqi, I, pp. 413-14). Pesyān's death led to the collapse of the gendarme regime in Mashhad, but the city and the province were only slowly and with difficulty brought under the control of Tehran.

Pesyān's death also smoothed the way for the incorporation of the gendarmerie into the new army that was being constructed by Reżā Khan; besides, the removal of such a charismatic rival facilitated the rise of Reżā Khan to supreme military command and, eventually, to the highest political power and constitutional position.

Colonel Pesyān was the eponymous pivotal presence in the 1980s' novel, *Zawāl-e Kolonel*, by Maḥmud Dawlatābādi.



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