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SATTĀR KHAN

SATTĀR KHAN (b. Janali village, Azarbaijan, 1868; d. Tehran, November 9, 1914), later known as "Sardār-e Melli" (The People's Commander), one of the most popular heroes from Tabriz who defended the town during the Lesser Autocracy (*estebdād-e ṣaḡir*) in 1908-09 (FIGURE 1). He was the third son of Hījj Hīasan Bazzāz from Qara-dāḡ. While he was still a child, his eldest brother, who had become a highway robber, was executed by the authorities. The family moved to Tabriz where Sattār himself came into conflict with the law when he tried to find a hideout for two Caucasian fugitives to whom his father had given shelter. He was incarcerated for two years in Narin Qalʿa, a notorious local prison (Amirḵizi, pp. 12-13). Afterwards he too became a brigand and was subsequently imprisoned again. He also served in the gendarmerie controlling the main road between Ḵuy and Marand, and for a while found employment as part of the armed escort (*tofangdārān*) to the crown prince Moẓaffar-al-Din Mirzā and was given the title of khan (*ḵān*). After a period in Tehran, he headed an auxiliary troop fighting Turkmen highway robbers near Mashad. Later he returned to Tabriz, and again turned to highway robbery and had to flee the town to escape imprisonment. In 1894-95 he went on a pilgrimage to the holy shrines, ʿAtabāt in Iraq. In Kāẓemayn, Sattār Khan was told of grievances against the guards and janitors at the holy shrine in Samarra and later he himself had a taste of their harsh and insulting behavior towards the Shiʿite pilgrims. In a meeting with the celebrated *marjaʿ-e taqlid*, Mirza Hīasan-e Širāzi (1815-94), he told this revered religious figure about this appalling situation. Moved by the latter's visible distress at hearing his account, Sattār Khan assembled a gang of young men

and they gave the caretakers a thorough beating. The latter lodged a complaint with the Ottoman authorities but thanks to Mirzā-ye Širāzi's personal intervention, no action was taken against Sattār Khan and his accomplices (Amirḵizi, pp. 16-18). After a second trip to the ʿAtabāt in 1901-02, when he made a vow at the shrine of Imam ʿAli in Najaf to mend his ways and lead a law-abiding life, he was employed as the manager of an estate in Salmās belonging to Hīājji Moḥammad-Taqi Ṣarrāf, a wealthy landowner from Tabriz. Although Sattār Khan proved energetic at defending the estate against local marauders and thugs, his lack of any formal education proved too great a handicap in matters of accountancy and management and he left in 1903–04 to return to Tabriz where he became a horse dealer (Amirḵizi, pp. 18–19; Ṣafāʾi, pp. 390). He continued to be a *luṭi*, supporting the people of his district, Amirḵiz, against the arbitrary excesses of the government.

Sattār Khan is reported to have adopted Shaikhi tendencies when he became a follower of Ṯeqat-al-Eslām, the leading Shaikhi cleric of Tabriz and a pro-Constitutionalist. According to Noṣrat-Allāh Fatḥi, Ṯeqat-al-Eslām played a major role as a leading figure during the defense of Tabriz and was Sattār Khan's main adviser (Fatḥi, pp. 358-61). *Luṭi*s were often used by high-ranking local clerics or notables to secure their political and economic interests. Although generally reputed to be a devout Shiʿite, like most supporters of the Constitutional movement he was accused of being a Bābi by his detractors (Ṣafāʾi, I, p. 393, n. 1).

Sattār Khan was already a well-known figure in Tabriz, particularly in his own quarter of Amirḵiz, before the time of the Lesser Autocracy. But it was during the eleven months of civil war (Jomādā I 1326 – Rabiʿ II 1327/June 1908 – July 1909) that he achieved fame not only in Tabriz, but also in the entire country and beyond. Like many of his contemporaries, he did not fully grasp the significance of a constitution and how it could be implemented. Apparently, as a firm opponent of tyranny and a staunch seeker of justice, he had been waiting for a chance to fight the despotic Qajar government (Ṣafāʾi, I, p. 391; Amirḵizi, pp. 24-26). As a *luṭi*, he may simply have seized the opportunity to prove his courage and his fighting skills on a larger arena. Having become a member of the Tabrizi *mojāhedin* (revolutionary militia) in the spring of 1907, and a member of the Constitutionalists' police force, Sattār Khan also joined the *Anjoman-e ḥaqiqat*, one of the main organizations of the Tabrizi Constitutionalists (for the role of the anjomans see CONSTITUTIONAL REVOLUTION i. INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND, p. 171). He made his first

public appearance when he volunteered to arrest Akrām-al-Salṭana and his men, riflemen of the former crown prince Moḥammad-ʿAli Mirza, who had been sent by the shah to eradicate the Constitutionalists in Tabriz. He was too late, however, since the men had already fled when he and his followers reached their shelter in the gardens outside Tabriz (Kasravi, I, p. 325-29). Later, Sattār Khan set out with his comrade Bāqer Khan for Tehran with 300 men to defend the Parliament (*Majles*) against Moḥammad-ʿAli Shah and his troops. However, at the same time as the bombardment of the Majles in Tehran on 22 Jomādā I 1326/23 June 1908, civil war broke out in Tabriz between the Constitutionalists and their opponents. Along with their men, Sattār Khan and Bāqer Khan had to return at once to Tabriz where they joined in the fighting.

The following eleven months of civil war in Tabriz and the siege of the town by government troops can be divided into three stages: The first stage is characterized by street fighting in the city in late June and early July 1908, when the Mojāhedin succeeded in preventing the royalist forces from gaining control over the city. During the second stage, the royalist forces were stationed in the outskirts of the town and attacked it repeatedly, but to no avail. Beginning in early February 1909, the third stage is marked by the siege of Tabriz, which brought hunger, disease and death. The blockade was brought to an end by Russian military intervention (Afary, pp. 212-13). By then, the central venue of the Constitutionalist cause and its resistance against the shah and his government had moved from Tehran to Tabriz. Owing to the courage and stamina of a large part of the population of Tabriz as well as to the determination of some of its leaders, Sattār Khan among them, the Constitution was “salvaged.” During these three phases of civil war, Sattār Khan emerged as both a local and a national hero. When civil war broke out in Tabriz, Sattār Khan and his men went to protect their quarter, Amirḵiz, against the government troops and the *Šāhsevan* forces of Raḥim Khan. In contrast to Bāqer Khan who, after nearly two weeks of heavy fighting in the town, hoisted a white flag to signal his surrender, Sattār Khan exhibited much resolution and held his ground. Together with some of his men he went through the town on 17 Jomādā II 1326/17 July 1908 and took down all the white flags hoisted by the people. Had Sattār Khan succumbed to capitulation, the Constitutional cause might have suffered irreparable damage (Amirḵizi, p. 121). As it was, his action encouraged the Constitutionalists in Tabriz and elsewhere in Persia to persevere with the struggle. In recognition of their courage and their military successes, Sattār Khan and Bāqer Khan were

awarded the honorary titles “Sardār-e melli” and “Sālār-e melli,” respectively, by the *Anjoman-e ayālati* (the provincial assembly). In the following months, the Mojāhedin prevailed over the anti-Constitutionalist forces in Tabriz and drove the government troops out of town. From there, ʿAyn-al-Dawla’s troops regularly attacked Tabriz and also staged full-scale combat against the Mojāhedin. However, the governor’s attempts at destroying the Mojāhedin’s military and moral cohesion was unsuccesful. Sattār Khan emerged as the military leader of Tabriz and, backed by his advisors Amirḵizi and Ṯeqat-al-Eslām, also played an important role in formulating political decisions. In the accounts presented by Iranian chroniclers, he usually emerges as the main force providing security in Tabriz, and as a man whose manliness (*mardānegi*), courage and bravery reinvigorated the Constitutional Revolution. He is described as primus inter pares (*raʾs-e raʾis*) in overall command of all the Mojāhedin from Tabriz as well as their Armenian and Caucasian comrades (Bāmdād, II, p. 60). His fame spread afar when news of the Constitutionalists guided by Sattār Khan along with his picture reached newspaper readers worldwide. On the other hand, some later accounts by European observers depict Sattār Khan as having been spoiled by his success. Apparently, according to one of E. G. Browne’s sources, “He began to rob inoffensive citizens; his house was full of spoils; […] he took to heavy drinking; he took unto himself many wives; he was no longer seen in the firing rank, but rested on his laurels in slothful ease” (Browne, p. 442).

In the beginning of 1909 the situation in Tabriz deteriorated. In order to break down the resistance of the population through physical hardship and deprivation, ʿAyn-al-Dawla established a blockade. From 13 Moḥarram 1327/4 February 1909, the city was completely cut off from its supply routes. Repeatedly, the Mojāhedin tried to open these routes to provide the starving population with food, but they could not end the blockade. Sattār Khan and his men tried in vain to open the road to Julfa, which was, however, soon entered by Raḥim Khan’s men. Neither military engagements nor diplomatic efforts succeeded in ending the siege. Since Moḥammad-ʿAli Shah did not comply with the British and Russian desire for an armistice in Tabriz, both the British and the Russians agreed to let Russia send troops into Persia to end the siege of Tabriz. When the shah finally ordered an end to the siege in Rabiʿ I 1327/April 1909, Russian troops were already on their way. In the face of the advancing Russian troops, Sattār Khan, Bāqer Khan, and others sought asylum in the Ottoman consulate. Following the shah’s abdication on 27 Jomādā II 1327/16 July 1909, the Mojāhedin felt safe enough to leave the consulate. Sattār Khan

was appointed governor of Ardabil and left Tabriz on 23 Šaʿbān 1327/9 September 1909. After only two months he had to give up the struggle against the internal squabbles within the town and Raḥim Khan's advancing troops, and return to Tabriz. Apparently, he proved to be a drunken and aggressive governor who didn't know how to control himself (Ṣafāʾi, I, pp. 404-5).

In Tabriz, the newly appointed governor, Moḵber-al-Salṭana, and the Russian consul were eager to rid themselves of the presence of Sattār Khan and Bāqer Khan. They and other luṭis had done their duty, their services were no longer needed and, as in the case of Sattār Khan, they seemed incapable of executing governmental functions. Therefore, for fear of further unrest in Tabriz, Sattār Khan and Bāqer Khan were sent to Tehran. Even the members of the *anjoman-e ayālati* indicated that the two men had to leave Tabriz in the interest of the people and that they should not return (Malekzāda, VI, p. 190). On 7 Rabiʿ I 1328/19 March 1910 Sattār Khan and Bāqer Khan were escorted out of the town by a large crowd, joined by members of the national militia and a band playing music. Members of parliament greeted them in Qazvin and thousands of people awaited them in Mehrābād, near Tehran. In the capital itself both men received an official welcome by the shah and members of the government at the Golestān palace. For a few days they were the honored guests of the new government before they found their own lodgings. Sattār Khan settled in the Pārk-e Atābak. The competing Constitutionalist factions tried to gain favor with Sattār Khan and Bāqer Khan. Soon they were both embroiled in the capital's political turmoil, a situation that they could neither comprehend nor handle properly. At the same time, the situation in the capital was becoming more and more unstable. This was largely the outcome of the presence of a large number of armed men in the city whom the government could not control. After the assassination of Sayyed ʿAbd-Allāh Behbahāni on 7 Rajab 1328/15 July 1910 and two activists of the Democratic party on 25 Rajab/2 August of the same year, the government and parliament agreed to disarm the Mojāhedin. While Sattār Khan and other leading Mojāhedin figures negotiated the terms of the disarmament with the government, large numbers of discontented Mojāhedin assembled in the Pārk-e Atābak. Although a compromise was found that guaranteed a higher price for the weapons to be collected from the Mojāhedin as well as the integration of Sattār Khan and Bāqer Khan into the government forces, and although a number of Persian and foreign envoys tried to mediate, hostilities finally broke out on 1 Šaʿbān 1328/8 August 1910. Sattār Khan and Bāqer Khan sided with the 1,000 strong Mojāhedin forces after the siege of the Park by 1,500 Armenian and Baḵtiāri

troops. In the ensuing skirmish Sattār Khan was wounded in the leg. He later pleaded to be allowed to return to Tabriz but this was turned down by the government and he died in Tehran on 28 Ḏu'l-Ḥejja 1332/16 November 1914.

Although in his seminal work, *Bandits*, Eric Hobsbawm focuses on social bandits in rural societies, some of his findings are applicable to the Iranian *luṭigari* in its urban context. Bandits, he says, are potential rebels, because they "resist obedience, are outside the range of power, are potential exercisers of power themselves" (Hobsbawm, p. 12). Sometimes, bandits join revolutionary movements when they consider its motives to be just. Then, they demonstrate their trustworthiness by their personal behavior, showing self-sacrifice and devotion to their cause (Hobsbawm, p. 114). As urban social bandits, Iranian *luṭi*s could act both decently and outrageously at the same time. Belonging to the urban poor, these *luṭi*s held on to Shiʿite values and were associated with pre-Islamic Iranian traditions that drew their inspiration from heroic ideals and proclaimed virtues like manliness and heroism (Martin, pp. 126, 113–14). In their combat against the central government, local high-ranking clerics or notables often used *luṭi*s as pawns; and after achieving their aims through their manipulation, they would usually rid themselves of them. Sattār Khan perfectly fits the image of the urban social bandit or *luṭi*. He defended the rights of Shiʿite pilgrims at the holy sites in Iraq, fought for justice, protected his people in Tabriz during the Constitutional Revolution, and proved to be incapable of leading a respectable life when his particular "*luṭi*-skills" were no longer needed.

Regarding the chroniclers of the Constitutional Revolution cited here, one has to bear in mind that they have to be regarded as storytellers whose narratives recreate the history of the revolution according to their personal and political viewpoints (Afshari, p. 491); and that they were often inclined to use their accounts of the events to emphasize concepts like Iranian identity and patriotism (Vaziri, p. 160). According to Mohammad-Reza Afshari, the historians of the Constitutional Revolution can be divided into three groups: the populists (like Aḥmad Kasravi) focused on the common people and glorified the Mojāhedin in Tabriz; the elitists (among them Fereydun Ādamiyat and Ebrāhim Ṣafāʾi) concentrated on reformers and demystified popular heroes; the traditionalists (among them Nāẓem-al-Eslām Kermāni and Mehdi Šarif Kāšāni) sympathized with the leading pro-constitutional Mojtaheds (Afshari, pp. 477–94). In spite of their differing accounts, it is largely thanks to these chroniclers and intellectuals that Sattār Khan's memory has survived.

Amirḵizi gives a long list of, as he calls it, of "Sattār Khan's commendable qualities and praiseworthy traits" (*ṣefāt-e pasandida va ḵaṣāyel-e setuda-ye Sattār Khan*). Likewise approving were Kasravi and Malekzāda, who witnessed Sattār Khan's appearance in Tabriz during the revolution, and created their myth of the brave hero "with unshakeable beliefs and purity of heart" in their writings (Kasravi, I, p. 328; Malekzāda, V, p. 17). Others, among them the well-known and more recent historian Fereydun Ādamiyat, are more critical of the man, describing him simply as a highway robber called "Sattār Khan" (Ādamiyat, p. 132).

It is, therefore, extremely difficult to establish an unbiased image of men like Sattār Khan about whom little is known from other sources. Fortunately, however, the Persian as well as English sources differ in their portrayal of a personality whose merits seem to be undisputable but whose character defects have equally to be taken into account. Nevertheless, Sattār Khan gives a face to the Constitutional Revolution and even represents it, at least after the coup d'état of 1908. He presents himself as an example of a mythical personage, and as a long-lasting focal point of collective memory and identity, whose symbolic function has an impact until this very day. Perceived as a local hero in Azarbaijan, he is still remembered as one of the champions of the Constitutional Revolution throughout Iran.

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