



ṬARZI, MAḤMUD

ṬARZI, Maḥmud (b. Ġazni, 1 Rabi' II 1282/1 Sombola 1244 Š./23 August 1865; d. Istanbul, 22 November 1933), writer, journalist, politician, and a prominent figure in Afghanistan in the first quarter of the 20th century ([FIGURE 1](#)).

Through his father, Ġolām Moḥammad Khan (1830-1900), son of Sardār Raḥmdel Khan, Maḥmud Ṭarzi was a member of the distinguished Moḥammadzay Bārakzay Sardārs of Kandahar (Qandahār); through his mother, Saṭṭanat Bēgom, he was descended from the Sadōzay clan of the Popalzay tribe. He was 17 years old when his father, who had fallen into disgrace with Amir 'Abd-al-Raḥmān (q.v.; r. 1880-1901), was expelled from Afghanistan along with his entire family. After three years in Karachi (January 1882-March 1885), Ġolām Moḥammad Khan left British India for the Ottoman Empire. He took up residence in Damascus, where Maḥmud was employed at the Secretariat of the province (Ġ. M. Ṭarzi, *Divān*, pp. 4-10).

The twenty years he spent between Damascus and Istanbul were intensely instructive for the young Maḥmud. They gave him an opportunity to receive a sound modern education, to come into contact with European culture and progressive and pan-Islamist ideologies, and to travel; having already traveled in British India and Iraq, he went on a pilgrimage to Mecca, made a brief visit to Paris (1889) and toured the eastern Mediterranean (1891). His encounter with [Jamāl-al-Din Afġāni](#) in Istanbul (1897) was a decisive moment in his intellectual education: “seven months of conversations are worth seven months of traveling” (*Serāj al-aḳbār* VI/5, pp. 1b-8). The encounter reinforced his conviction that a progressive interpretation of the precepts of Islam would



encourage the sort of planned modernization that Muslim countries required.

When Amir Ḥabib-Allāh (r. 1901-18) awarded an amnesty to those exiled under his father's reign, after an initial exploratory visit (1902) Maḥmud returned to Afghanistan with his family after a twenty-three year absence (January 1905). No other Afghan had been steeped to this extent in such a cosmopolitan world and in Levantine culture, and the views he expressed at Kabul's royal court were entirely novel. His pro-Turkish aspirations had the Amir's ear, but met with opposition amongst conservative, pro-British elements represented by members of another Moḥammadzay branch that had returned from India, the Yaḥyā Khēl family, known as the Mosāḥebān (Saikal, pp. 46-49). Soon, he was surrounded by a group of "Young Afghans," inspired by his reformist ideas and by the ideal of progress to which he hoped to convert his fellow countrymen.

Thanks to his mastery of foreign languages, he became Amir Ḥabib-Allāh's close informant on world events, both in the Muslim world and, in particular, in Europe. He was also appointed to run a translation office (*dār al-tarjama*). He taught history and geography at the new military school for one year, he wrote, and prepared a bi-monthly publication, *Serāj al-aḳbār* (1911-18), which relayed his beliefs and was to become the first newspaper of modern Afghanistan. When signing his articles, Maḥmud used his father's nom de plume "Ṭarzi," or *stylist*, which his father had personally transmitted to him and which he had already used to sign his first published text (*Dibāĉa*).

Education, the compatibility of Islamic principles with modernization, economic development, European imperialism, independence and national unity, and pan-Asian solidarity were all topics covered by his newspaper (Gregorian, 1967, pp. 167-70; Schinasi, 1979, pp. 153-220), receiving Amir Ḥabib-Allāh's overall support. However, during the First World War, Ṭarzi and his friends took a more overtly political stance, arguing in favor of joining the war alongside the German-Turkish axis, whereas Ḥabib-Allāh decided that Afghanistan should remain neutral. This caused tensions between Ṭarzi and the Amir, and ultimately put an end to the publication of *Serāj al-aḳbār* (December 1918) (Dupree, p. 7; Sims-Williams).

His career as a thinker was to take a new turn the following year when Amān-Allāh (r. 1919-29) succeeded his father on the throne of Kabul and appointed Ṭarzi as his Minister of Foreign Affairs (April 1919). In harmony with the new Amir, who was one of his most ardent supporters among the "Young Afghans"

and who was also his son-in-law, Ṭarzi began to reap what he had sown: he led the laborious Anglo-Afghan negotiations in Mussoorie (1920) and Kabul (1921), signed the treaties for Afghanistan's independence, ending forty years of British control, and steered Afghan foreign policy in a moderate direction. And he witnessed the implementation of a first wave of administrative, legal and social reforms, part of the structural transformation and difficult program to modernize the Afghan State, a program he had inspired.

Yet at the same time, Ṭarzi remained critical. He believed that the reforms should be implemented at a more moderate pace to allow the population to adapt, and called for socio-economic reforms to be supported by an appropriate political structure. Amān-Allāh rejected his criticisms and distanced himself from his mentor in favor of an entourage whose loyalty Ṭarzi believed to be debatable (Saikal, p. 83). Now that he no longer had the young Amir's ear, Ṭarzi sought to retire, and tried to do so on several occasions: by leaving Kabul, officially for health reasons, to open the first Afghan legation in Paris (Sept. 1922-Oct. 1924); by resigning as Minister of Foreign Affairs, but when his resignation was refused (summer 1925), he retained his title whilst reducing his activities to a minimum (1925-26); and lastly by leaving for Switzerland (1927). Ṭarzi was however at Amān-Allāh's side at the start of his long journey, accompanying him to Egypt and Italy (December 1927-January 1928), but not beyond. In April 1928, he returned to Afghanistan, where he no longer held any official position, then left the country for good a few months later when Amān-Allāh's regime collapsed (see [BAĀĀ-YE SAQQĀ](#)). After spending a few months in Tehran, Ṭarzi returned to Istanbul in October 1929, where he died five years later of cancer of the liver, and was buried at the cemetery in Eyüp.

In Karachi, Tarzi had married an Afghan, a Kōgiāni, who died in Damascus. He then married the daughter of a Syrian tradesman, Moḥammad Šāleḥ, who was a muezzin at the Umayyad Mosque. Of their children, ten survived, five boys and five girls (Dupree, p. 21). His wife, Asmā Rasmiya (1877-1945), was an educated woman, and from 1920 to 1928, she and their elder daughters, in particular Kayriya, who married Prince 'Enāyat-Allāh, and Ṭorayā, the wife of King Amān-Allāh, made a great contribution to the schooling and education of Afghan women (Schinasi, 1995, p. 449, 454), which was something Maḥmud Ṭarzi had constantly called for and believed to be an absolute necessity (Nawid, 1995, pp. 359, pp. 362-63; *Serāj al-aḵbār*, I/7, pp. 7b-9).

Among the written works of Afghan authors, those of Maḥmud Ṭarzi are



second to none, both in form and in substance. As well as being hailed as the “father of journalism (Žubal) and overseeing the entire production of *Serāj al-akbār* for which he wrote most of the articles, Ṭarzi was also a translator from the Turkish language, an essayist (*Rawza-ye ḥekam*), and a poet (*Žulida*). He brought a new genre of prose to Afghanistan, including short stories and travel writing (*Siāhat-nāma*), and a different poetry genre that abandoned the delicate images typically found in the classical Indo-Persian style, in favor of harsh topics like schools, agriculture, Europe or corruption (*Adab dar fann*; Ghani, 1988, p. 436).

Ṭarzi introduced Kabul’s intellectual circles to a new school of thought, one that addressed the issues of modern times, both in the Orient and in the West, as well as philosophical, scientific and religious questions, and the situation in Islamic countries. When he described the glorious past of the Muslim civilization, pointing out that mathematics and natural sciences were first developed by Muslim scholars, and when he analyzed the reasons why Muslims later lagged behind the West, in “What were we? What have we become?” (*Āyāče bāyad kard?* [What is to be done?] pp. 12, 51, pp. 52-53), it was to underscore the fact that the study of science and technology was essential to recover this strength, and that Islam was perfectly reconcilable with progress (*Elm wa eslāmiyat*).

Afghanistan and Afghans were also central to Ṭarzi’s concerns. His first publication on returning to Afghanistan was a description of the country, written in verse (*Afġānestān, aṭar-e manzum*) and aimed at his fellow countrymen, whom he invited to take both a proud and critical view of their history (*Āyāče bāyad kard*, pp. 106-32) and to reflect on their main weakness, their lack of instruction and ignorance of the world around them, which had led the people to inertia (*Rawza-ye ḥekam*, pp. 140-41, 150-51). This was why he constantly called for all forms of knowledge acquisition.

He recommended that respecting the Afghan monarchy should be as much of a duty as respecting Islam’s precepts, the two being inseparable, and also inseparable from respect for one’s country, in which he included what he called the “shared country” that unites Muslims all over the world (*Waṭan*, pp. 88-89).

When Ṭarzi and the Yaḥyā Khēl family returned from exile at the very start of the 20th century, Afghanistan’s political and intellectual elite were given their first glimpse of the ideology of modernization. Ṭarzi’s stature is a result of his



progressive vision, his ideals for the radical transformation of Afghanistan accepted by Islam, and his determined efforts as a militant nationalist to ensure that his country found its legitimate place as a nation.

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