RELIGIOUS DISSIDENCE AND URBAN LEADERSHIP: BAHÁ'IS IN QAJAR SHIRAZ AND TEHRAN*

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1. Introduction

In order better to understand the role of dissent confessional groups in Qajar urban life, I have chosen to compare and contrast developments among the Bahá’í religious minority in two cities, Shiraz and Tehran. The two settings were, of course, quite different. The first was a small provincial capital near the Persian Gulf in the southwest of the country, where the largely male leadership of the religion was mostly drawn from merchant and artisan families. The second was the capital of the entire country, a large city in the north-central area of Iran where government officials and élite women were much more important among adherents, along with some shopkeepers. Both might be seen as holy cities for Bahá’ís. Shiraz was the birthplace of the Báb, Sayyid ʻAlí Muḥammad Shirāzī (d. 1850), recognised by them as the promised Mahdi or messiah of Islam, and the house of the Báb became an important shrine and one of the places to which pilgrimage was ordained in the Bahá’í Most Holy Book (al-Kitāb al-agdas). In the twentieth century, Shiraz came to be the city with the largest Bahá’í population in the country, numbering in the thousands, with Tehran in second place. Tehran, on the other hand, was the birthplace of Mírzá Ḥusayn ʻAlí Nūr Bahá’u’lláh (1817–92), the founder of the Bahá’í religion that developed from Babism, and the sites associated with his life were treasured by his followers.3

A key question here must be how the Bahá’í religion managed to establish itself at all, given that the Qajar ruling class on the whole hated “Babism” and feared it as a manifestation of commoners’ insurgency, and that the Shi‘ite clergy likewise abhorred the movement as a loathsome heresy. Following the lead of the British sociologist Peter Smith, I believe that sociological theories about the way resources are successfully mobilised can shed some light on the progress of the Bahá’í faith in nineteenth-century Iran, though such theories cannot account for the subjective, spiritual dimension of religious change and can therefore tell only part of the story. It is, however, a significant part. The important questions here have to do with networks of recruitment, social and demographic bases, societal infrastructures, fund-raising, and organisational development.4

Building on the enthusiasm generated by the messianic Babi movement of the mid-century, the Bahá’í religion had gained around 100,000 adherents in Iran by the end of the nineteenth century, in a population of some nine million. It was founded in 1863 by Bahá’u’lláh (the “Glory of God”), a follower of the Báb who was exiled in 1852 from Iran to the Ottoman Empire and subsequently maintained under surveillance or in prison by the Sublime Porte in Baghdad (1853–63), Edirne (1863–68) and Acre (1868–92). Both the Babi and the Bahá’í religions were mass movements, encompassing diverse social classes and strata throughout Iran. In the twentieth century, a branch of the Boir Ahmadi tribe near Isfahan embraced the Bahá’í religion, but in the nineteenth century the religion appears to have encompassed few members of tribes. Substantial numbers of adherents lived in village settings. Yet clearly the urban communities played a central role in developing institutions and culture (both popular and literate), in acting as clearing-houses for letters from the Bahá’í leadership in exile and for other information.

It must be kept in mind that the Bahá’í religion was very different in the nineteenth century from what it became in the twentieth. From the 1930s Bahá’ís began withdrawing altogether from politics, avoiding membership in political parties and eschewing high government posts, and their leaders built up a system of pre-publication censorship that discouraged adherents from writing about politically charged issues. In nineteenth-century Iran, in contrast, the Bahá’ís were a radical-reformist group advocating banned ideas such as parliamentary elections, some of their members held high political office, and they had not been forbidden to join political groupings or (later) parties. Although Bahá’u’lláh discouraged violence on their part, and recognised a separation of religion and state, he did not hesitate to denounce Ottoman and Qajar tyranny or to advocate liberal, reformist principles that were anathema to these absolutist monarchies. Ironically, in sociological terms the Bahá’í faith was probably more church-like early in its history,
becoming more sectarian and withdrawn from mainstream Iranian society in the course of the twentieth century.

The Bahā’ī scriptures written by Bahā’ullāh taught the unity of the world religions, the unity of mankind, the need for parliamentary governance in individual countries and for a world government on the global level, the need to narrow the gap between the rich and the poor and to end the arms race among nations, an improved status for women, and the desirability of modern science and technology.5 What is striking about these ideas is their modernity, and the likelihood of their appeal to Iranians making the transition from old-regime feudalism to agricultural (or peripheral) capitalism. It would not be entirely fair to see these principles as simply bourgeois ideology, as some Marxists have. While some of them might have been congenial to the urban bourgeoisie, others (such as the emphasis on amelioration of the condition of the poor or strong state intervention in the economy, both local and global) were not. Moreover, the ideas were congenial to others than simply merchants: the vast majority of those who became Bahā’īs were peasants or urban workers and artisans. Admittedly, for many of the illiterate working-class Bahā’īs, the attractions of the religion may have lain more in its millenarian promise of a bright new future, in its being an authentic, indigenous Iranian response to the onslaught of European modernity, or in the dread the religion inspired among the feudal nobility (so that joining it was a means of “silent” protest against their exploitation by the Qajar, Shi’ite establishment).6

Urban artisans and workers who had become Bahā’īs surely helped shape the tone of the religion, and the “option for the poor” and insistence on social justice in Bahā’i writings of this period must be seen in the context of the existence of substantial numbers of the working poor in the community. For example, a large clan of Kazaruni tailors began becoming Bahā’īs in Shiraz around 1865–66. In Kashan “there were many Bahā’īs whose profession was weaving,” and in the late 1880s “there were not many customers for such handwoven goods, [and] the friends were very poor.”7 In the nature of the case, the ideas and culture of working-class urban Bahā’īs are now very difficult to recover, since, being illiterate, they left few records of their lives. This paper will therefore focus on élite urban Bahā’īs, about whom a great deal of information has survived, though it has been little drawn upon by historians.

The urban élites consisted mainly of merchants and of government officials (though both groups were investing heavily in land in this period, becoming landlords and blurring the distinctions among them). The merchant class in Iran underwent development and differentiation in conjunction with the vastly increased significance, 1850 to 1900, of cash-cropping for the world market. Late Zand and early Qajar societies were characterised by many practices that it is difficult to regard as anything but “feudal”, especially the assignment of land and of tax-farming rights to officials and officers in return for high service to the state. Although a capitalist sector existed in mediaeval Iran, consisting of circulating merchant capital, it was oriented toward long-distance trade in luxury goods such as silk, and remained small in comparison with the agricultural output (much of it for subsistence). The advent of cash-cropping on a large scale in the nineteenth century transformed the old-style traders of the bazaar into a more capitalist, modern sort of import-export merchant.8 The importance of Bahā’ī merchants raises Weberian sorts of questions. Was there a special involvement by Iranian religious minorities, such as the Bahā’īs, Armenians and Jews, in the rise of agricultural capitalism? If so, what accounts for it? Did it have to do with ideology, or the structural situation of these minorities?

In this same period, the nature of urban and national governance was changing. Whereas Fatḥ-‘Ali Shāh (r. 1798–1834) was still a relatively mobile ruler on horseback with a small bureaucracy of scribes, by the later nineteenth century some persons were entering government service having been educated in Europe or at the Tehran Polytechnic College (Dār al-Funūn). The urban patriciate of local high functionaries increasingly arranged such new training and education for their children, and also formed alliances with the import-export houses. Capitalist rationality was coming, slowly and unevenly, to Iran, displacing or transforming the old bazaar peddlars and shopkeepers, and the old government scribes ministering to tribal warriors.9

In order to understand the history of the Bahā’īs of Iran, it is important to recognise that the religion’s advent coincided with this transition of the country from a sort of tribal feudalism to agricultural capitalism, and that these social changes were important for urban élites who adopted the new religion. Again, in so saying I do not wish in any way to reduce the spiritual experiences, the emotion, heroism and intellectual life, of those who adopted the Bahā’ī religion to a matter of economics. I wish only to say that the converts were embedded in a social matrix, and that their religious decisions had social contexts and consequences as well as subjective ones.

2. The community in Shiraz

Among what groups did the Bahā’ī religion find adherents in nineteenth-century Shiraz? What institutional and other steps allowed them to
establish a new religion in this hostile, conservative Shi’ite setting? Of course, in some ways the Baha’is is simply built upon some achievements of the earlier Babi movement. Shiraz had been the site of important events in the early history of the Babi movement. There, in the spring of 1844, ‘Ali Muhammad Shirazi declared himself the “Bab,” or divine intermediary, to Mullâ Husayn Bihru’i, and sent his disciples forth to spread his word. There the Bab was arrested and forced to practice pious dissimulation (taqiyya) by appearing to recant his claims. His disciples, such as Mirzâ Sâdiq “Muqaddas” Khurâsânî of the ulama class, preached the faith publicly in Shiraz’s mosques before they were ostracised. The Bab’s messianic claims appear to have been popular in the bazaars of Shiraz, and to have attracted some artisans and merchants. Among the Babi artisans was a clan of cobbler, two of whom had attended Qur’ân school with the Bab.10 The Bab’s execution in 1850 in Tabriz, the suppression of Babi uprisings in Zanjan, Mazandaran and Nayriz (the last not far from Shiraz), and the widespread anti-Babi pogroms from 1852 in response to the failed assassination attempt against Nasîr al-Dîn Shâh, left the Babi community devastating, frightened, and underground where it continued to exist at all. The cobblers and other Babi artisans in Shiraz appear to have kept a low profile in the eighteen-fifties and early eighteen-sixties.11

Three social strata played a predominant role in reacting to the rise of the Baha’i religion in Shiraz from about 1865. The first was the high government officials resident in the city, the nawkar class, including the governor of the province, the governor of the city, and other influential bureaucrats. These officials may be divided into a national elite of Qajar functionaries and a local patrician stratum. The second was the Shi’ite clergy or ulama, especially the leaders of Friday prayers and other popular figures. The third was the bazaars or merchants, i.e. the merchants and artisans, with their loose corporate identities, their clans and guilds. Both the government officials and the clerics levied such harsh taxes on artisans and merchants of small property, in return for relatively few services, that it is hard to see this expropriation of resources as anything other than a form of exploitation. Of course, some bazaars voluntarily contributed to the religious institution, but not all did. In nineteenth-century Iran, the ulama employed seminary students and lûjî street gangs to collect from the recalcitrant.12 Attitudes to government taxation were no doubt less ambiguous, and given the prevalent tax-farming, and the low level of services offered by the state, most bazaars probably saw it as parasitical.

Shiraz was one of only twelve Iranian cities in the late 1860s with a population of 25,000 or more, and it had long occupied an important place as a commercial and cultural centre. It was sacked and pillaged by the Afghans in 1729, leaving it a shadow of its former self. In the late eighteenth century it became the capital of Iran under the Zands, who undertook important public building works there that shaped the modern city, including the Vakil bazaar and mosque, and this period contributed to its recovery. We have estimates by Western travellers for its population in the early nineteenth century, of between 12,000 and 18,000. By mid-century it may have grown to about 25,000. In 1852–53, as a result of an abortive attempt on the life of the Shah by Babi leaders in Tehran, the Qajar state conducted a country-wide pogrom against Babis in which hundreds and perhaps thousands died. Babism began in Shiraz and had many adherents there, and their persecution can only have added to the travails of the annus horribilis of 1853, when a great earthquake struck the city and a locust plague produced widespread famine in Fars province. These disasters may have reduced the population of the city by as much as half.13 By the late 1860s, when our story begins, Shiraz had recovered from the calamities of the 1850s, reaching a population of about 25,000. Thereafter it grew modestly, attaining a mere 30,000 in 1913.14 Only in the twentieth century did it become a large city. The city was ethnically diverse, attracting settlers from nearby villages and towns like Zargan, Ardakan and Kazarun, and members of pastoral groups such as the Turkic-speaking Qashqâ’is. A Zoroastrian community existed, much smaller than at Yazd and Kerman. About fifteen per cent of the population in the nineteenth century was Jewish, though the symbolic dominance of Shi’ism was underlined by disabilities placed on Jews, forced conversions (some 3,000 were converted to Shi’ism around 1827, including silk merchants in the Vakil Bazaar), and major pogroms, as in 1910.15 It was also a centre for heterodox Shi’ite Sufi orders such as the Ni’mat-Allâhîs and the Dha’habäh.16

Shiraz served as the central distribution point for commercial goods and services in Fars province, especially the import-export trade of the Gulf port of Bushire (Bushîhr). It was, as well, the recipient of provincial tax monies. In the range of services it offered, it was nonpareil as the “central place” of the region, with its government offices, courthouse, seminaries, Friday prayer mosques, extensive bazaar, and, in the late nineteenth century, large telegraph station.17 Shiraz was small compared to cities such as Tabriz, Isfahan, Tehran or Mashhad. Still, the tax revenues generated by Fars in 1867 were respectable 380,000 tumans, eclipsed only by the districts of Azerbaijan (620,000 tumans), Gilan
(440,000 tumans) and Isfahan (420,000 tumans). Fars was apparently more prosperous than many provinces with capitals that were larger or about the same size, probably as a result of its lucrative cash crops, such as opium, cotton, dried fruit and tobacco. Because of a skewed distribution of wealth, high inflation and population growth, however, a good deal of poverty existed among peasants and especially among urban artisans.

The second half of the nineteenth century witnessed certain economic developments that greatly changed the economy of Fars. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 cut thousands of miles off the sea journey from Bushire to Europe, and allowed the extensive export into southern Iran of inexpensive European factory-made goods, either directly from Europe or via India. Although the individual consumer benefited from cheap textiles and other made goods, Iranian artisans, especially textile workers and shoe makers, suffered considerably as their labour-intensive, high-cost techniques made it impossible to compete with imported manufactures. Moreover, Iranian merchants increasingly faced a balance of trade deficit, making it difficult for them to finance these imports. The export trade to India, which had a growing appetite for long-time South Iranian products such as grain and fruits, took on a new significance and volume. More important, farmers in unprecedented numbers began planting cash crops such as opium poppy, tobacco and cotton. Opium poppy cultivation spread throughout Fars and Yazd, and, in addition, farmers there grew grain, tobacco and cotton, as well as grapes (for raisins, juice, and Armenian and Jewish wines) and fruit for drying and exporting. Cash crops such as opium poppy were not unproblematic, since they displaced foodstuffs and created discontent among peasants during food shortages and famines (though they probably did not cause the famines); nevertheless, throughout the late nineteenth century they were produced by Fars in ever greater volume. Peasants began learning to store some food against shortages, and to guard against planting too little barley. In the 1890s, opium constituted a quarter of Iran’s visible exports, but the trade declined precipitously in the opening decade of the twentieth century. The crisis in the Iranian silk industry as a result of a silkworm epidemic in the 1860s, from which it only partially recovered thereafter, also contributed to this diversification of the export economy. Iranian farmers and agricultural brokers had already begun turning to other cash crops before the silkworm epidemic, but it did exacerbate their balance of trade problems. The late nineteenth century was in any case a period when Iran became much more firmly integrated into the world economy, though as a peripheral producer of raw materials, with much of the external trade and capital (with the exception of the opium business) in the hands of Europeans.

Many of these export crops passed through Shiraz on their way to the Gulf. Iranian long-distance merchants from Fars developed marketing networks for these commodities, establishing trading houses in Bombay, Calcutta, Port Said, Istanbul and even Hong Kong. The encounter with European colonial institutions, and with local reformist and independence movements, made these Iranian expatriates more cosmopolitan than the majority of their compatriots. Within Iran, those merchants who proved successful in the opium trade grew fabulously wealthy and politically influential, as did the government officials, such as Qava‘m al-Mulk, who sponsored it and taxed it. As we shall see below, one of the important Iranian export houses (with an outpost in Hong Kong) was operated by the Afnān clan, Baha‘is and relatives of the Bab.

Let us turn now to the rise of the Shiraz Baha‘i community. The leadership of the Babi movement after the Bab’s death in 1850 was highly contested, with a number of Babis arising unsuccessfully to claim the station of “He whom God shall make manifest,” a messianic figure prophesied by the Bab. A key such figure was Bahā‘ullāh, who nevertheless for the most part kept his claims concealed from the Babi public until the mid-eighteen-sixties. In the meantime, Bahā‘ullāh’s younger half-brother, Mirzā Yahu‘y Nūrī, “Subhi‘ Azal,” came to be recognised by many Babis as the leader of the community. He went into voluntary exile in Baghdad, joining his older half-brother Bahā‘ullāh, who had been expelled there from Iran by the authorities. Also, the mother of the Bab, deeply in mourning and a strong believer in her son, went to live in the shrine cities of Iraq. The Bab’s widow, Khadija Begum, lived after his martyrdom with her Shi‘ite relatives in Shiraz and tried to keep the faith of the Bab alive (most of the Bab’s clan had not accepted him). The city’s indigenous Babi community probably consisted at this point of a handful of artisan families. In addition, a few Bab families were established in Shiraz by government decree. In the eighteen-fifties, Babis captured at Nayriz were brought to Shiraz, and although most were executed, some women and male children were allowed to live. In addition, the family of the Bab martyr Hujjat of Zanjan was brought to Shiraz and put under the guardianship of the local notable Mirzā Abu ‘l-Hasan Khān Mushir al-Mulk, a man who frequently served as chief minister of Fars province. Mushir al-Mulk eventually married Hujjat’s daughter, and Hujjat’s son Mirzā Husayn became a servant in his household. Hujjat’s daughter seems to have retained some feelings for the Babi religion, and kept in contact with Khadija Begum. Her husband,
Mushir al-Mulk, as will be seen, was not above targeting Babis and Baha’is for political purposes until he experienced a change of heart toward the end of his life.\textsuperscript{22}

Khadija Begum received letters from Bahá’ulláh, who was beginning in the late eighteen-fifties to put forth oblique signals that he was the promised one of the Báb, “He Whom God shall make Manifest.” He carried on a lively correspondence with Khadija Begum (and with many other prominent Babis). Khadija Begum, in the meantime, convinced her thirteen-year-old nephew, Aqá Mirzá Aqá Núr al-Dín, to believe in the Báb. He in turn eventually won his mother, Zahrá Begum, and his father, the great merchant Mirzá Zayn al-Abidin, over to Babism, in the opening years of the eighteen-sixties. The leader of this merchant clan was the maternal uncle (“Khádí Akbar”) of the Báb, Sayyid Muhammad Shirázi, and his newly-Babi relatives now urged him to investigate his martyred nephew’s claims by going to speak with the Báb’s mother, and with Šúhí Azal and Bahá’ulláh, in Iraq. He did in fact, in 1862, undertake this journey, and while in Baghdad, Bahá’ulláh responded to his written questions by penning in only three days a long theological and mystical treatise entitled The Book of Certitude (Kitáb-i Iqán), often known at this time as the “Treatise for the Uncle.” This book, which is characterised by a crisp, straightforward style of argumentation, persuaded Sayyid Muhammad Shirázi to become a Bábí. He in turn brought his relatives Hájjí Mirzá Muhammad ‘Ali, Hájjí Mirzá Muhammad Taqi, and Hájjí Mirzá Buzurg into the faith. Gradually, a significant number of the Báb’s relatives, most of them engaged in import-export trade, became Babis. They kept their conversion as secret as possible, even from their servants. Many of them risked corresponding with Šúhí Azal and Bahá’ulláh, however.\textsuperscript{23}

Bahá’ulláh was brought from Baghdad to Istanbul by the Ottoman authorities in 1863, probably as a result of pressure from the Iranian government to have him removed from Baghdad, which was near to the Shi‘ite shrine cities, and from which he could keep in close contact with the Babi community in Iran. When he proved uncooperative in the capital, the Sultan ‘Abd al-Aziz further exiled him to Edirne, where he remained from late in 1863 till the summer of 1868. In Edirne, Bahá’ulláh and Šúhí Azal gradually fell out with one another. Bahá’ulláh had begun putting forth messianic claims before he left Baghdad, and continued to do so in Edirne. Clearly, if he was the Báb messiah, then Šúhí Azal’s position as the Báb’s vicar was not worth much. Although the date is not yet established with any certitude, it appears to be in mid-1865 (1282 A.H.) that Bahá’ulláh began sending letters and emissaries to Iran with open proclamations of his claims. As a result, Šúhí Azal attempted and failed to poison him, then tried to convince his barber and bath attendant to murder him in his bath. This scheme, too, failed, owing to the loyalty of the barber to Bahá’ulláh. In March of 1866 Bahá’ulláh withdrew from the Babi community, and from any relationship with Šúhí Azal. In September, 1867, he challenged Šúhí Azal to a divine test at the Selimiye Mosque, and when the latter neglected to show up, he lost face. The Babi community became split between Azalis and Baha’is, with the Baha’is emerging as the majority. In 1868, Bahá’ulláh was exiled yet again, to Acre on the Syrian coast, and Šúhí Azal was sent to Cyprus.

It seems likely that it was sometime between December 1865 and February 1866 that Bahá’ulláh’s emissary, Muhammad “Nabi-i A’zam” Zarandí, came to Shiraz. A major disciple of Bahá’ulláh, as well as a poet, historian and eloquent preacher, he stayed at the house of Aqá Mirzá Aqá Núr al-Dín, and the Babis flocked to see him there. He then asked that a meeting be held in which they all brought their copies of the Writings (nivištiját, i.e. the writings of the Báb, Šúhí Azal and Bahá’ulláh). They held the gathering in the house of Aqá Mirzá ‘Abd al-Karim. Nabil ordered these in piles. He announced that the first pile consisted of Tablets (alváh) from the Báb. The second derived from Him Whom God shall make Manifest, whom the Báb had foretold to his followers, on whose good-pleasure he had made the acceptance of his (the Báb’s) own Tablets. Nabil said the Báb had predicted his coming would be soon, and had mentioned the year Nine (i.e. 1852, the year of Bahá’ulláh’s epiphany while imprisoned for heresy in the Shah’s dungeon). He then swept up the third sheaf of papers (those from Šúhí Azal) and declared that they were hellish writings; he tossed them in the stove, burning them up. This action produced an uproar, and Hájjí Sayyid Muhammad Shirázi, the Báb’s maternal uncle and the clan patriarch, leapt to his feet shouting, “What game is this?” Aqá Mirzá Aqá Núr al-Dín pointed out that the Báb himself had at first been rejected, and that it was after all Bahá’ulláh whose Book of Certitude had brought them into the faith. They agreed to investigate the matter and Nabil left for Isfahan.\textsuperscript{24}

Khadija Begum came to hear Nabil from “behind a curtain,” and reported that “as soon as I heard him say that the Blessed Beauty [Bahá’ulláh] was ‘He Whom God shall make manifest’, promised in the Bayán, I experienced the same feeling I had that night” when the Báb declared himself.\textsuperscript{25} The Báb’s widow was greatly respected, and had wide contacts in the Babi community; she reports that “believers
travelling to Shiraz always came to pay me a visit and I received them in the home of Mirzã Aqa [Nur al-Din], my nephew. Her endorsement of Bahá'í ullah's cause was therefore very important. Aqa Mirzã Aqa Nûr al-Din also quickly threw his lot in with Bahá'u'lláh, predictably agreeing with his beloved aunt, and he convinced several of his cousins to join him. He was at a disadvantage, however, insofar as they considered him merely as one of themselves and gave his words no special weight. A Bahá'í intellectual, Hájí Muhammad Ibráhîm Yazdî, had a sister who had married into the Afnân family in Yazd, and this combination of learning and relatedness lent him some authority. Through him many of the Afnân clan became Bahá'ís. Indeed, all the members of the clan resident in Shiraz did so.

Most Babís in the province of Fars accepted Bahá'u'lláh rather quickly. Among the prominent dissenters was one Shaykh Muḥammad Yazdí, who had had a long standing grudge against Bahá'u'lláh, and who insisted that the Báb's laws could not be abrogated before they had even been implemented. Babís with sympathies toward Bahá'u'lláh had earlier been restrained by Aqa Mirzã Aqa Nûr al-Din from acting against him. Now they came to him, asking permission to kill him. Bahá'u'lláh's own teachings, of course, encouraged peace and forbade murder, but these Babís-turned-Bahá'ís had scarcely had time to imbibe his new ethic. Aqa Nûr al-Din would only agree that Shaykh Muḥammad needed to be taught some manners. In the meantime, the latter heard about their intentions toward him and fled from Shiraz to Istanbul. This anecdote shows that once the vast majority of the Babís in a community had adopted the Bahá'í faith, the position of the minority who clung to the old religion became difficult or even untenable, not only because of active Bahá'í hostility but also because they would have been denied community resources, support and patronage, becoming isolated in a hostile Shi'ite society.

Hájí Muḥammad Ibráhîm Yazdî, the Bahá'í intellectual whose word carried so much weight with the Afnân clan, also was responsible for bringing many others into the Bahá'í faith in 1865 or 1866, including a clan (silsilá) of Kazaruni Babi tailors, who came to about sixty individuals, male and female. Aqa Mirzã Aqa Nûr al-Din helped them out materially (import-export merchants dealing in textiles, indigo and other goods could clearly offer some preferential deals to tailors who were co-religionists). The Babi cobbler (kharráz) clan, some of whom had seen Bahá'u'lláh on trips to Baghdad, also became Bahá'ís. These Bahá'ís, both wealthy merchants and less well-off artisans, met in Aqa Nûr al-Din's large house, where the artisans made an impression as being gregarious and boisterous. Meanwhile, Hájí Muḥammad Ibráhîm Yazdî's successes in proclaiming the new religion came to the attention of local Shi'ite ulama, and he was forced to return to Yazd. This involuntary homecoming proved an opportunity for Yazd to teach the faith to the Afnân in that city. The younger members of the clan there insisted that the patriarch, Mirzã Sayyid Ḥasan accept it first. When after great efforts Hájí Muḥammad Ibráhîm succeeded in convincing the elder, the rest of the clan also became Bahá'ís.

When Yazd left Shiraz, his place among the Bahá'í ulama class there was taken for sixteen months by Nabil-i Akbar Qâ'înî, the renowned Bahá'í philosopher and mujtahid who had graduated from the course given by Shaykh Muṭtaqá al-Ansâri of Najaf, the leading Shi'ite religious leader of his time. Qâ'înî stayed at the mansion of Aqa Nûr al-Din, and his eloquent discourses, backed up by such weighty Shi'ite diplomas, helped convert many to the Bahá'í faith. Even as early as 1867, Bahá'u'lláh's new emphases on peace, social harmony and tolerance had begun to mark off those Babís who followed him from the more militant members of the old community, as can be seen in a petition of spring 1867 sent to the American consulate from the new Bahá'í community of Baghdad. Bahá'u'lláh's teachings on harmony were largely still oral, but his post-declaration Tablets, such as the Sûrat al-Âshâb ("Sûra of the Companions"), also contained ethical precepts, such as the need to avoid useless wrangling and controversy.

The nascent Bahá'í community first became an issue in local Shirazi politics sometime between May 1866 and May 1867 (A.H. 1283), and continued to be one intermittently thereafter, culminating in a major episode of persecution in the early eighteen-seventies. In the mid-eighteen-sixties, two prominent rivals for local political power in Fars were Abu Ẓafar al-Mulk and Mirzâ 'Ali Muḥammad Kâhn Qavâm al-Mulk, Abu Ẓafar al-Mulk, one of the largest landowners in Fars, wanted the vizierate, whereas Qavâm al-Mulk was mayor (kalântar) of Shiraz and tax-agent of the city's guilds. The Qavâm al-Mulk family was part of a Shirazi patriciate, an urban élite generated locally, with which the national government cooperated. The family's origins as part of the élite go back to the early eighteenth century, when a merchant named Hájí Muḥammad Hashâb accumulated vast wealth. His son, Hájí Hashâb, became the ward boss of five of Shiraz's city quarters. The next in the line, Hájí Ibrâhîm, helped the Qajars come to the throne but subsequently fell from favour and was killed (along with all but one of his sons) by Fatâ-ʿAli Shâh. Because of his local popularity, the surviving son, ʿAli Akbar Kâhn, was appointed by the Shâh to be the mayor of Shiraz in 1812, a post he held till his
death in 1865, gaining in the meantime the title Qavām al-Mulk. He was succeeded by his son, ʿAlī Muḥammad Khan.

The second Qavām al-Mulk had therefore only been in office a year or so when Mushir al-Mulk threw down the gauntlet. Both were competing for the favour of the newly-installed Qajar governor of Fars, Sultān-Muḥammad Mirzā Ḥusām al-Salṭana. Qavām al-Mulk appears to have been an important patron of the Afnān merchants, and their adoption of Bābism and then the Bahāʾī faith made them vulnerable. Mushir al-Mulk, who had married into the family of the Bābi martyr Ḥujjat-ṣanāʾī, had good information about the Bahāʾī community in Shiraz and knew of this vulnerability. He therefore contacted a leading cleric, Shaykh Ḥusayn Nāṣīm al-Sharīʿa, suggesting that they begin a campaign of repression against the Bahāʾīs. The cleric was given an extensive list of Bahāʾīs, including prominent members of the Afnān clan, two converts from the ulama class and a number of artisans (cobbler, butchers, a stirrup-maker, and of course several Kazarun tailors). The list was handed over to Ḥusām al-Salṭana, the governor, who in turn called Qavām al-Mulk to task for allowing traitors to proliferate so rapidly in Shiraz and for not suppressing enemies of the crown.

Qavām al-Mulk is said by the Afnān chronicler to have grown fearful of the ire of the prince and to have offered him a water pipe to calm him down. He pointed out to the governor that the list contained the names of several leading merchants and that their inclusion might be inaccurate. These individuals took the lead in organising and patronising Muharram celebrations, which the governor and Mushir al-Mulk had themselves attended and by which they had been impressed. Qavām al-Mulk appears to have been subtly reminding the governor of the merchants’ Sayyid status, and of their relationship to the bazaar and the ḫāṭīs, and the potential for trouble should the state move against them. Shiraz had had a great deal of such trouble in previous decades, and had experienced a major urban revolt in 1865 which had led to the fall of the vizier of Fars and the execution of two high officials at the order of Nasir al-Dīn Shāh. The allusion was therefore a powerful one. He is reported to have concluded, “These are not ordinary persons whom I can take into custody because of the designs of some, and throw the city into turmoil.” He is even said to have threatened to resign as mayor should the prince insist on this course. Ḥusām al-Salṭana at length agreed to back down in the case of the merchants but said that he wanted the others arrested. Eventually, Qavām al-Mulk was able to convince him to drop the entire matter.

Troubles flared up again four or five years later, around 1870–71 (A.H. 1287). One of the artisan Bahāʾīs, Ṭaquṭ-ṣanāʾī Ṭaquṭ-ḵābās (‘stirrup-maker’), developed marital problems. His estranged wife, encouraged by his enemies, went to Shaykh Ḥusayn Nāṣīm al-Sharīʿa and complained to him that her husband was a Bahāʾī. Since Rīḵābās was a loyal attender at Friday prayers and even unrolled and then rolled up the shaykh’s prayer-rug at the mosque, he was loathe to accept the woman’s testimony. Eventually her persistent complaints resulted in Rīḵābās’s arrest, on charges of being a Bahāʾī and of copying out Bahāʾī-ullāh’s works. Shaykh Ḥusayn was demanded from Rīḵābās that he curse the Bāb and Bahāʾ-ullāh, but the latter refused and was therefore imprisoned. At this point, Mushir al-Mulk went to the Prince-Governor with the earlier list of accused Bahāʾīs and demanded their arrest also. The governor gave in, and some of the Bahāʾī artisans and ulama were arrested and imprisoned. Apparently Qavām al-Mulk was able to keep the Afnāns out of jail. After a time, Mullā ʿAbdallāh Fāḍil, Mullā ʿAbdallāh Būkā, Ḥājjī Abu ʾl-Ḥasan, Karbalāʾī Ḥasan Khan Sardistānī, and Muḥammad Khan Balūch were released. In late 1874 (1291), after Ḥusam al-Salṭana had returned as governor, three remaining Bahāʾīs were executed for heresy, including Ṭaquṭ-ḵābās, Muḥammad Nābi Khāyāt, and Ḥājjī Khayyāt. Despite the vulnerability of such an artisan Bahāʾī who dared challenge the Qajar Shiʿite establishment by adopting the new religion, the strong position of the Afnān clan as great merchants in Shiraz, and their ties of clientage with patricians such as Qavām al-Mulk, appear to have been under most circumstances enough to protect them from major persecution. Qavām al-Mulk proved a good choice of patron; in the eighteen-seventies, he was “able to use the increased revenue gained from his role in the opium trade to extend his control over nearly all the land around Shiraz,” and he succeeded in creating the Khamsah tribal federation for his own purposes. The Afnān clan’s flourishing import-export house can only have cemented their relations with this patron, who knew he needed them and other members of the new bourgeoisie like them. Qavām al-Mulk was not the only sponsor whom the Bahāʾīs were able to find from among the government officials. Ironically enough, at some point Mushir al-Mulk himself became a Bahāʾī. In 1877 the prince-governor Farḥād Ṭirzā had abruptly charged Mushir al-Mulk with corruption, dismissed him as chief minister of Fars, and had him bastinadoed and imprisoned. Mushir al-Mulk regained his freedom by offering Farḥād Ṭirzā a large bribe, and thereafter retired to his estates, which he managed as a private subject until his death in December.
1883. His sister’s son, Nāsir al-Mulk, took his place in government service. In his last six years of life, Mushir al-Mulk spent a great deal of time in his private garden, passing his days with friends such as Ḥājī Sayyid Ismā‘īl Azghandi (a Baha’i). At some point he married the daughter of Mullā Muḥammad Riḍā “Rāżī al-Rūḥ” Manshādī, a prominent Baha’i preacher. Through discussions with his in-laws and with Azghandi, Mushir al-Mulk accepted the new religion, and sent an exquisite pen-case and 1,000 tumans to Baha’u’llāh in Acre with Azghandi. Baha’u’llāh returned the money to Azghandi, but kept the pen-case and wrote out a tablet in honour of Mushir al-Mulk. Thereafter, this patrician proved an invaluable aid to the Baha’is.38 Mushir al-Mulk’s ironic conversion raises many questions that the sources do not allow us to answer. Was he guilty about the three Baha’is whom he had helped have executed? Even given the concession that he had had a profound change of heart, was becoming a Baha’i in some part a way of taking revenge on Nāsir al-Dīn Shāh and his son, who had used him so badly after decades of service? Iranian nobles often devoted their last years to spiritual pursuits, taking up Sufism or patronising Shi’ite ceremonies, so that Mushir al-Mulk’s devotion to Baha’u’llāh does not seem implausible.

The backbone of the Shiraz Baha’i community, however, was the artisans and merchants. The merchants benefited from a number of advantages, including their mobility and the international character of their commerce. Bombay served not only as a centre of trade but also as a place where Baha’i culture could begin to develop more freely. In the late eighteen-eighties the Afnān clan established a printing press in Bombay, where they printed several volumes of Baha’u’llāh’s writings and smuggled them back into Iran for distribution throughout the country through clandestine Baha’i networks. Should any of the Afnāns become controversial, they could always send him to one of their commercial outposts (thus they dispatched Aqā ‘Nūr al-Dīn to Bombay in 1879 in the wake of the judicial murder on charges of heresy of his business associates, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn Nāhīrī in Isfahan). In the 1880s, the Afnān families of Shiraz and Yazd were influential in founding a Baha’i community in Ashkhabad, under the Tsarist Russian Transcaspian administration not far from the Iranian border, which served as a refuge for some Baha’is from persecution and as a further commercial opportunity in the tea trade.39 That portion of the international trade conducted by the Afnān family consisting of opium became problematic in strict Baha’i terms when Baha’u’llāh in ca. 1890 added a final verse to his Most Holy Book condemning opium and other intoxicants. The sources do not indicate whether they felt any cognitive dissonance about trading in a substance forbidden by their religion but which they themselves did not use. The ethic of the Iranian merchant class on the whole was to find ways of reconciling their commercial pursuits with the religious law; thus most Shi’ite merchants were involved in interest-taking on loans, and paid mujahids well for casuistic rulings and juristic fig-leaves under which they could do so. Baha’i merchants were at least spared that particular inconvenience, since the Bāb and Baha’u’llāh allowed fair interest to be taken on loans.

Mazandarānī lists prominent Shirazi Baha’is outside the Afnān clan also, taking note of a few merchants (named bazzāz, indicating dry goods’ dealers) and ulama. In the main, however, these pillars of the community were artisans, mainly tailors but also cobbblers, bakers and milliners. Many of these groups were suffering from the impact of imported European manufactures and from high price-inflation, and the Baha’i faith almost certainly meant something different to them than it did to the Afnāns. Baha’is believed in having a parliament, thereby tilting at Qajar absolutism, believed, in an egalitarian fashion, that the little people could be better because of their belief than the great lords, and believed that Baha’u’llāh’s advent was a harbinger of dramatic, millenarian change in the world. We do not know how the artisans’ allegiance to these ideas, which they apparently tried to keep secret but with little success, affected their standing and activities in the guild structures, but they appear not to have formed a separate, identifiable group in this period. Most Baha’is still attended Friday prayers and joined in Muḥarram commemorations, in effect practising Shi’ism while believing in Baha’ism. Khadija Begum complains in her memoirs that there were relatively few women Baha’is in Shiraz, so it appears to have been primarily a semi-clandestine male club (one wonders whether, after the martyrdom of Aqā Rikābāz, some Baha’i men actually kept their conversion from their wives).40 The gender imbalance in Shiraz was righted later on. In Baha’i communities in other major cities women were often eminent, numerous and influential.

The nineteenth-century Baha’is of Iran maintained the division into social orders typical of Qajar Iran, so that they recognised a “class” of “ulama”, learned men trained originally in Shi’ite seminaries who became Baha’is. Some Baha’i ulama dissipated their new faith and continued to be employed in mosque or seminary. Others openly declared themselves and were forced to either to adopt a new profession or to live an itinerant life as they were expelled from one town after another by their alarmed colleagues among the Shi’ite clergy. Two prominent Baha’i ulama played an important cultural role in the city. Mullā ‘Abdallāh Fādīl was among those released from prison in 1871, having
pleaded that he was simply a seeker after truth, sampling Sufism, philosophy and other things. Shiraz was an important centre for both the Dhahabi and Ni‘mat-Allahī Sufi orders, and this slightly less dangerous form of heterodoxy clearly offered a camouflage for some Bahá‘ís. A brilliant philosopher, mystic and theologian, he actually managed to continue teaching at the Manṣūriyya seminary, interspersing allusions to the Bahá‘í faith among his lessons. The head of the seminary managed to get him dismissed for a while, but in the late eighteen-nineties he was reinstated through the influence of the Bahá‘í prince-mujtahid, Shaykh al-Ra‘isī. Mullā ‘Abdallāh Būkā’, a renowned reciter of elegies for the Imām Ḥusayn who reduced his audiences to tears, was known also as a mystic and expert in law. The Bahá‘í merchants valued the Bahá‘í ulama, as has been seen, often offered them their houses to live in for months at a time, and paid for their missionary travels, as, for instance, Jīnābī Dīhqān of Shiraz supported Mirzā Ḥaydar ‘Alī Isfahānī.\footnote{131}

The only important institutional development which the chronicles mention is the refurbishment of the House of the Báb in the early 1870s. Khādji Begum sent a request to Bahá‘ulláh that the work be undertaken, and he agreed, ordering it to be done. The repairs were completed in 1873 or 1874 (1290 A.H.).\footnote{132} The Báb’s widow took up residence there. From 5 October 1876 onwards Farhād Mirzā Mu‘tāmid al-Dawla became governor of Fars, and he determined to demolish the Bahá‘í shrine. Khādji Begum was forced to move out for a few months. In the meantime, the chief secretary (munshī-bāshi) of Fars, Mirzā Abu ‘l-Ḥasan, and Mirzā Zayn al-‘Abidīn Khān ‘Aliyābādī, both of them members of the prince-governor’s court, and both Bahá‘ís, succeeded in intervening to prevent the destruction of the Báb’s house.\footnote{133} With its continued existence secured and its refurbishment, the house of the Báb became for the Bahá‘ís in Shiraz and surrounding areas a valued and authentic shrine, making it a holy city for them. The travelling, pilgrimage and gathering associated with such a shrine must have contributed to community cohesion.

The recruitment networks for Bahá‘ís in Shiraz included mercantile and artisanal clans, linked with one another by ties of patronage and business interactions. They also reached into the Shi‘ite religious institutions, so that some ulama, seminar teachers, preachers and reciters of Muharram elegies became Bahá‘ís. At least one member of the local patrician class, Mushir al-Mulk, adopted the new religion. Provincial officials such as Mirzā Abu ‘l-Ḥasan, the chief secretary of Fars, also joined, and were able to influence the decisions of the Qajar authorities concerning the Bahá‘ís. Among the merchant clans, it was especially important that their patriarchs, such as Sayyid Muḥammad Shirazi “Khal” in Shiraz or Mirzā Sayyid Ḥasan in Yazd, should be willing to accept the new religion. The devotion to Bahá‘ulláh by the Báb’s widow, the Afnān matriarch Khādji Begum, was no doubt also important for the spread of his religion among her relatives and especially among women. Because of egalitarian feelings among cousins within the clans, notable Bahá‘í converts called upon Bahá‘í ulama and intellectuals, such as Nābi‘ī Aʿẓām Zarandi, Nābi‘ī Akbar Qā‘īnī and Shaykh Muhammad Ibrāhīm Yazdī, to preach to their relatives. The latter lost no face in accepting the religion from such eminent outsiders.

Both the great merchants and the artisans brought advantages to the maintenance and propagation of their adopted faith. The former provided significant monetary contributions to community development and missionary work, as well as being able to call upon the help of their state patrons in the Shirazi patriciate (patrons they had gained because of their heavy involvement in the lucrative commodity export market). Their far-flung import-export business, with outposts in Bombay and Hong Kong, made available to Bahá‘ís their communications and transportation infrastructures, such as the mail service on steamers that plied the Karun river and the Gulf routes to India, or the Afnān-owned printing press in Bombay. Those commercial entrepôts were also ideal postings for family members whose heterodoxy became too notorious in Shiraz itself. The merchants’ large homes constituted suitable meeting-places for the entire community, including its poorer members, where face-to-face interaction could occur that contributed to group cohesion. That the Afnān merchants were Sayyids, recognised descendants of the Prophet, also lent them both religious and social charisma and helped protect them against harsh punishment by the state. Between 1863 and 1892, very few Bahá‘í Sayyids were executed, most notably Sayyids  Ḥasan and Husayn Nahri in Isfahān (the “King” and “Beloved” of “martyrs” in Bahá‘í parlance), in 1879, at the hands of Zill al-Sultān. Ironically, such persecution by the religious and secular authorities contributed to the cohesion of the Bahá‘í communities, who tearfully commemorated their martyrs and derived from the tales of their sufferings a spiritual uplift and vigour. The artisans, in their turn, could offer each other mutual support, and could invoke the help of their own guilds and neighbourhood religious clubs (hay‘āt). The artisans, badly hurt by the competition of inexpensive European imported goods, and taxed heavily by the Qajar officials, may have derived a certain amount of satisfaction from the fear they were able to inspire in the ruling class by their simple adoption of the new religion. Without the artisans’ greater numbers, the Bahá‘í merchants would have been much more isolated and vulnerable.
3. The community in Tehran

The Baha'i community in Tehran also included merchants and artisans, but its leadership contained more members of the elite governmental (naubkar) class, who were, perhaps, especially interested in the political reforms advocated by Baha'ullah. As with the patronage of patrician families in Shiraz, the efficient government connections of the Tehran Baha'is allowed them to survive, despite continued harassment and major outbreaks of persecution. Although the community lacked any single woman with the stature of Khadija Begum, it benefited from the presence of several outstanding female leaders and so became an early centre of Baha'i feminism.

Tehran underwent much more growth and change in the late nineteenth century than did Shiraz. It was a small village when the Qajars adopted it as their capital in the late eighteenth century, but as it came to house a large bureaucracy and bazaars catering to its many princes, nobles and officials, its population mushroomed. Statistics are notoriously unreliable for Qajar Iran, and the range of estimates for Tehran varies widely. Nevertheless, it seems that Tehran had about 85,000-100,000 inhabitants in 1867, and about 150,000 in 1913. Tehran was, like Shiraz, affected by the vast increase in cash-cropping, and among its elite can be counted many absentee landlords who had become agricultural capitalists. Tehran also profited from being athwart trade routes from the east and south toward the Caspian and the Russian and Ottoman empires, allowing it to collect octroi taxes on the transit of goods. And, of course, it was the centre of the national state, the recipient of tax monies from all over the country, the site of the main bureaucracies and of military forces like the Cossack brigade. Some of the nobles and government officials resident there sent their sons abroad for their education, and the cosmopolitan merchant and foreign service elite had their influence on the capital. On the other hand, the state itself appears to have lacked the means to tax efficiently the new sources of wealth so that its employees' salaries were frequently in arrears and its soldiers were sometimes reduced to earning a living as artisans. Tehran also housed the main institution of secular higher learning, the Polytechnic College (Dār al-Fumín). Secular elementary and high schools also began opening from 1887, and Etahadieh found a drop in the number of religious elementary schools, mosques, and Sufi convents in Tehran from 1853 to 1903, suggesting that the capital was at this time on the way to becoming a secularising city. Such a trend away from traditional religion might have helped the modernist, liberal Baha'is.

Tehran had been an important Babi centre before 1852, but the community there was even more devastated by the pogroms of that and subsequent years than elsewhere. The hostility of Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh, the capital's most renowned resident and the object of the assassination attempt launched by 'Aziz Turshīzī and other Babi leaders in the capital in retaliation for the execution of the Báb, made life difficult for Babis there and later Baha'is as well. The Shah's son, Kârmān Mirzâ, was the governor of the city and its environs, and he, too, bore the Babis and Baha'is great antipathy. Further, the Shi'i clergy of the capital were numerous and influential, and wished the Babi-Baha'i movement to be destroyed. Every year, the chronicler says, brought news of some new killing or imprisonment. Still, a Babi community survived into the 1860s. Tehran in particular received visits, short and long-term, from Baha'i ulama and missionaries (muballighīn).

As in Shiraz, a merchant family served as an anchor for the Tehran community. Ḥājī Mirzâ Muḥammad ʿAttâr maintained a retail establishment in the Chahār-Suq Bazaar, and had become a Babi in the eighteen-forties, incurring the enmity of the ulama. These complained about him to the government, and he was imprisoned, but then released and expelled from the city for some time. When Baha'ullāh became renowned, in the late eighteen-fifties, ʿAttâr hastened to Baghdad and met with him. He then returned to Tehran. His wife, Havā', was a pillar of faith and was especially honoured by Baha'ullāh, and given by him the epithet Umm al-Awliyā' ('Mother of the Saints'). Their sons were Aqa Muḥammad Karim, Ḥājī Muḥammad Rahīm, Aqa Fāṭḥ Allāh and Ḥājī Shukr Allāh, all of whom became eminent in the community. Aqa Muḥammad Karim maintained an inn, and gave shelter to Baha'is passing through the capital, and his commercial establishment was a centre for the dissemination of Baha'i news. His store was burned down twice in the late nineteenth century by enemies (such arson and vandalism plagued many Baha'i merchants, and Baha'i farmers as well). In 1888 Aqā Muḥammad Karim made the pilgrimage to see Baha'ullāh in Acre.

This Baha'i merchant family employed marriage alliances to expand their commercial network and to gain important contacts in the government. Aqā 'Ali Ḥaydar Shirvānī, from the Caucasus, had been a follower there of Sayyid ʿAbd al-Karim. Presumably as a result of Tsarist Russian pressures on Caucasian Muslims, Shirvānī came to Tehran around 1880 and set up a shop. He received a good return from a small amount of capital. Mirzâ Ḥaydar ʿAli Isfahānī, the famed Baha'i missionary who had been imprisoned in Sudan, came to Tehran and brought Shirvānī into the Baha'i faith around 1885. Shirvānī combined his trading thereafter with serving his new religion, faithfully observing the new Law; for
instance, he gave Amīn Ardakānī 700 tumans in Bahā’ī tithes (the ḥuqūq Allāh, or Right of God, equalling 19% of net profits on certain transactions). Because Bahā’īs were carrying on a lively correspondence with Acre, there was much danger from government spies lest their letters be opened. Shirvānī held Russian citizenship, and his correspondence was protected by the Capitulations, so the Bahā’īs used his name to send and receive letters. Shirvānī maintained a good reputation with the Russian embassy in Tehran and the Russian Foreign Ministry. He married a daughter of Hājjī Muḥammad Raḥīm ʿAṭṭār, thus joining the Bahā’ī commercial elite in the capital; at least two of his four brothers-in-law, Aqā Ali Bey and Aqā Mashhadi ʿĪbād, were also merchants. When Bahā’ūllāh died in 1892, it was to Shirvānī that “Abd al-Bahā’ telegraphed the announcement.19

Shirvānī’s father-in-law, Hājjī Muḥammad Raḥīm ʿAṭṭār, had married the daughter of a high government official, Raḥīm Khan Farrash-Ghadab, the executioner who waited upon the Shāh in his royal antechamber. This official, Raḥīm Khan, was also from the Caucasus, and had a reputation for great bravery. His daughter, having married into a Bahā’ī merchant family, herself adopted the new religion, causing many dilemmas for her deeply committed, tradition-bound Shiʿite father, who was close to the Babi-hating Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh. Raḥīm Khan nevertheless faithfully protected and served the Bahā’īs. During the great famine of 1869–72, when perhaps a tenth of the Iranian population died and another tenth emigrated, the state set up special bakeries in four quarters of Tehran under Raḥīm Khān’s authority, and he in turn sought help from his son-in-law, Muḥammad Raḥīm ʿAṭṭār, in distributing bread equally to all the people. At this time, because of the enmity toward Bahā’īs on the part of Shiʿite commoners, they were ineligible to receive the famine relief and were threatened with starvation. Muḥammad Raḥīm ʿAṭṭār had bread distributed to the Bahā’īs at night, asking those who could afford it to pay for it, and handing it out to the rest gratis. He and his family at that time are said to have scammed on their own meals, and to have given some of their share to starving Bahā’īs. Khānum ʿAṭṭār’s attention to famine relief for Bahā’īs came to Bahā’ūllāh’s attention, whence his besowment on her of her epithet.50

The importance of the ʿAṭṭār women and men as community organisers and hosts is underlined by Mīrzā Ḥaydar ʿAlī Isfahānī, who lived in Tehran for several years. He wrote,

The only ones who were well off among the friends in Tehran were ʿAqā Muḥammad Karim ʿAṭṭār and his brother, Hājjī Muḥammad Raḥīm. These two believers and their sisters were all devoted to the Cause of God. Whenever the friends desired to have a sumptuous meal, they would send them a message, and the family would comply with their wishes and send Persian rice and roast meat. One night the brothers themselves attended such a banquet, and the delicious food was followed by fresh fruit.51

In the mid-eighteen-seventies, Muḥammad Raḥīm ʿAṭṭār became known as a Bahā’ī and was exiled from the capital, despite the protest organised by Umm al-Awlīyā’, involving two hundred of her powerful relatives. After five years in Baghdād he returned, but the surveillance of his house by Shiʿite enemies caused him to have to take refuge in his father-in-law’s mansion for two months, until the uproar died down. In the early eighteen-eighties, Raḥīm Khān received a posting abroad, and during his absence enemies of the Bahā’īs orchestrated a major round-up. In 1882, Kāmrān Mirzā Nāʾīb al-Salṭana, the governor of Tehran, arrested and condemned to death some fifty Bahā’īs, ʿAṭṭār among them. The prisoners were engaged by some of the royal family and clergy in more than one debate.52 Umm al-Awlīyā’ saw to the feeding of the prisoners in the meantime, and also undertook to plead with a leading Shiʿite mujtahid that they should be spared, but without success. When Raḥīm Khān returned to the capital, he exercised his good offices on behalf of his son-in-law, and after nineteen months of harsh imprisonment, the government released all the arrested Bahā’īs (who included the cream of the Bahā’ī intelligentsia of the time, such figures as Mīrzā Abu ʿl-Faḍl Gulpāygānī and Akhund Mullā ʿAlī Akbar Shāhmīrzādī).53 The ʿAṭṭār family continued to play a central role in the Tehran community thereafter.

Another important family in Tehran was a princely one, that of Shams-i Jahān Fitna, a Qajar princess and granddaughter of Fatḥ-ʿAlī Shāh. Of a religious disposition, she had been excited by the news of the Bāb’s charismatic claims in the eighteen-forties. Sayyid Muḥammad “Fātā al-Māliḥ” Gulpāygānī, who had been close to the Bābi disciple and poet Tāhira Qurrat al-ʿĀyn, had taken pupils among wealthy households in the capital around 1850, and he was hired to tutor Shams-i Jahān. He secretly brought her into the Bahāʾ religion, and encouraged her to meet the female disciple of the Bāb and famed poet, Tāhira, then under house arrest at the home of Tehran police chief Maḥmūd Khān Kalantar. Shamsi Jahān determined to meet the leader of the Babis, whom she had heard was Šubḥ-i Azal, and set out for his residence in Baghdad in 1858. In the end she was denied an audience with the furtive Mīrzā Yahyā, and instead she sent her questions to his brother, Bahā’ūllāh, who also had a following. The answers were brought to her early the next morning by Mīrzā Aqā Jān Kāshānī, Bahā’ūllāh’s amanuensis. He told
her that the figure “He whom God shall make manifest” promised by the Báb, was in fact Bahá’u’lláh, but he swore her to secrecy, insisting that this secret could not at that time be revealed. She returned to Tehran, meeting on the way with other Babis who were convinced that Bahá’u’lláh was their messiah. She writes that she was quite prepared when, around 1865–66 (1282), Ahmad Yazdí arrived in Tehran with the news that Bahá’u’lláh had revealed himself as the promised one of the Báb. She brought her brother, Táhmasp Mirzá Mu’ayyid ad-Dawla, into the Babi-Bahá’í faith, as well. She visited Bahá’u’lláh again, in Edirne, and died at Tabriz on her way back.54

Her brother, Táhmasp Mirzá, associated with and helped financially support Bahá’í ulama such as Muqaddas Khuráshíí, Nábi-í Akbar Qá’íni, and Mirzá Muḥammad Fúrúghí. Táhmasp’s son, Muḥammad Mahdí Mirzá, studied at a seminary and became a Shaykh for a while, but when he lost a public debate with Mirzá Abu ʻl-ʻAlí Fáḍlí Gulpáyání in Hamadan in 1888 (1305), he re-entered the Baha’í faith. He thereafter went to Acre and met Bahá’u’lláh, and this family remained devoted Bahá’ís in the next generations. Muhammad Mahdí Mirzá’s son, Muḥammad Ḥusayn Mirzá, became head of the telegraph office in Isfahan and then Tehran, and during the counter-revolution of 1908 he served as head of Muḥammad ʻAlí Shah’s consultative council, incurring the enmity of the revolutionaries (among them, ironically, another Bahá’í prince, the fiery constitutionalist Shaykh al-Ra’í). He fled to Ottoman territories when Muḥammad ʻAlí Shah was overthrown, but eventually was able to return to Iran, where he wrote defences of the Bahá’í faith.55

A government-connected member of the Bahá’í elite was Hájí Faraj Kháñ, the son of Colonel ʻAbdalláh Kháñ. His father had been among those charged with killing Babis in the pogroms of 1852, and young Faraj, then 15, witnessed some of the executions. He was affected by some of the last words of one of the Babís. His father died in 1857, and around 1863 he began arguing with his mother about the Babís. Sometime later he gathered up his money, packed his clothes, and left Tehran, informing his mother and relatives that they would never see him again. He went to Baghdad, where Mirzá Javád (Karbálá’í?) brought him into the Babi religion and taught him to believe that the Imam Ḥusayn had returned (a station claimed by Bahá’u’lláh). Around 1872, Hájí Faraj hastened to Acre, where Bahá’u’lláh was imprisoned, and succeeded in visiting him. Bahá’u’lláh asked him to return to Tehran to bring his mother into the faith, and Faraj set out for the capital with a group of other Bahá’ís. His mother and brother were delighted to see him, and his mother promptly had him engaged to a sixteen-year-old named Fátima Sulṭán, the daughter of Muharram Bey (a graduate of the military academy). Hájí Faraj brought his fiancée a literate Bahá’í woman as a tutor, and in the course of the lessons she embraced the new religion. Fátima Sulṭán and Hájí Faraj married and maintained a mansion near the telegraph station and the Royal Garden, which became a site for the comings and goings of the Bahá’ís. Hájí Faraj was the paternal nephew of Amin al-Sulṭán, who served as Prime Minister late in Násir al-Dín’s reign, and he was forced to observe caution. Among his relatives, only his mother knew he was a Bahá’í. When Bahá’ís were imprisoned, Hájí Faraj interceded for them with Amin al-Sulṭán. His wife Fátima Sulṭán Kháñum also attempted to succour arrested Bahá’ís and their families, using her high status as a woman of two prominent military families to approach Kámrán Mirzá and Náṣir al-Dín Sháh with petitions for the release of her co-religionists, sometimes with great success. When Mullá ʻAlí Ján Mázandáráñi was killed, she paid his burial expenses. When local Shi’ite toughs continued to bother Mázandáráñi’s widow, the family brought in men from the palace (da’irát al-Sulṭání) to beat them up.56

In addition to Umm al-Awliyá’í and Fátima Sulṭán Kháñum, there was another strong woman leader from the government-official class in Tehran, Ismat Kháñum Tá’íra. Born there in 1861, she was the daughter of Mirzá Ismá‘íl Kháñ Ashiyáni Mustawfí-yi Niğáám, a man of high status. Her mother was Háṣína Kháñum Zahra, an extremely accomplished woman and a poet. Ismat Kháñum’s maternal grandfather, a skilled Babi doctor and prolific author, had been physician to the prince Ḵúsam al-Salṭána (probably Muhammad Taqí Mirzá). Ismat Kháñum and her brother Isá were orphaned in 1868 when their father died. They were raised for a while by their grandfather, and then for a while by their maternal uncle Faraj Alláh Kháñ, the inspector-general (sāsíyá’í bashí) of the capital’s buildings. He hired tutors for them and had them taught polite Persian letters and Arabic. At one point little Ismat is said to have been in the presence of the Sháh, and attracted a comment from him on her boldness. When their uncle died, their mother struggled on with them. In 1877, at the age of sixteen, Ismat was married off to Mihr ʻAlí Kháñ, the deputy imperial bodyguard of the Sháh, and a fierce persecutor of Bahá’ís who often brought them as prisoners to his own house.

Ismat’s maternal uncle, Abu ʻl-Barakáát, was a Bahá’í who, in order to escape persecution, adopted the life of a dervish and went to India. On his return to Tehran he stayed with his niece and gradually brought her into the Bahá’í faith. Ismat Kháñum now began treating the Bahá’í prisoners who were brought to her house with compassion. Her husband
and brother, however, discovered her new adherence, and her attempts to help the Baha'is resulted in her being badly and repeatedly beaten by her husband. She remembered once going outside in the snow to sit on the steps after being battered one winter evening, and leaving the snow around her dyed red. She nevertheless persevered, and taught her daughters the faith, as well as finally convincing her brother, ʿĪsā Khān, to join. In the mid-eighteen-eighties, her husband died, releasing her from her nearly decade-long captivity. ʿĪsmat received a generous state stipend for Mīrzā ʿAli’s orphaned daughters, and her wealthy brother ʿĪsā Khān helped his sister out, so that she was able to maintain an independent household thereafter. She threw herself into Baha’i cultural activities. She began holding classes for Baha’i students in the capital. She wrote poetry under the pen-name of Ṭāhirra. She was known as a free-thinker (ḥurrat al-afkār), and worked for women’s emancipation (ḥurrīyyat al-niswām). She moved in the highest society of ʿelite Qajar women, including that of princesses, serving as a story teller and moral preacher and also subtly spreading Baha’i ideas. She not only taught girls informally, incurring much criticism from conservatives, but at length managed to establish a girls’ school. When the press became freer during the Constitutional Revolution, she published articles on women’s emancipation. She died in 1911.57

Other families were important in Tehran. The children of Mīrzā Ḥāshim Tafrišī split, some becoming Azalīs (a daughter, Badrī Jān, married ʿUbūd-i Azal), and some Baha’is. Among the Baha’is was his daughter, ʿHājir, who married a court astrologer, Mīrzā Muhammad Ḥusayn Munajjim-Bāshī. Their many children became Baha’is. Her brother Mīrzā Faraj Allāh married the daughter of the famous Baha’i missionary to India Jamāl Efendi Tunukbābīnī (born Sulaymān Khān, a very wealthy man of high status who had served at one point as governor of Tunukbābīn). Faraj Allāh’s son, Dr. ʿAṭṭā Allāh Khān, was educated at the Polytechnic College and took a medical degree, and later helped found the first Baha’i school in Tehran.58 Dr. ʿAṭṭā Allāh Khān may have inaugurated a major tradition, that of the modern Baha’i physician. Not only was one of the Shāh’s astrologers a Baha’i, but one of his more eminent court musicians, Mīrzā ʿAbdallāh (1843–1918), was one also.59

Despite the importance of the government official class, clearly they constituted a small proportion of the community. Interestingly, in Tehran the religion spread beyond the confines of Shiʿite Islam and Babism, attracting members of religious minorities. Examples are Ḥākim Maṣḥ and Ḥākim Ḥaqq-Nazar, Jewish physicians trusted by Nāṣir al-Dīn’s court, who became Babis and then Baha’is.60 Another such figure was Mīrzā Ayyūb Ḥākim, the son of Muḥammad Shāh’s court physician, who was in his turn also close to the court. From a Jewish background, he became a Baha’i in 1873 through Ḥājī Muḥammad Ismāʿīl Dhabīḥ. A number of Jews, especially members of his immediate family, attempted to dissuade him. He persevered, however, and went to see Bahaʾ-ullāh in Acre. On his return, he helped bring his brothers and then a large number of other Tehranis Jews in the Baha’i faith. In the early 1890s, Curzon reported that 150 Tehranis Jews became Baha’is in a single year.61 The association of Baha’is with the Zoroastrian school in the capital also resulted in some conversions among that religious minority.62 For these minorities, embracing the new religion of Baha’ism was particularly courageous, since in so doing they gave up their protected status as recognized religious communities, putting themselves beyond the pale in the eyes of the state.

Tehran at one time or another also sheltered a number of important Baha’i ulama. These included Mīrzā Abū ʿl-ʿAdī Gulpāyghāni, a mujtahid who taught at the seminary of the Shāh’s mother in the citadel of Tehran in the mid eighteen-seventies, and who became a Baha’i in 1876 after long discussions with Baha’i ulama (his first encounter with the religion came at the hands of an iron smith who confounded him). He lost his position at the seminary and was hired as secretary by the Zoroastrian agent in the capital, Mānakjī Ṣāḥib, a Parsee from Bombay who had opened a school for Iranian Zoroastrians. After his arrest and imprisonment in 1882–83, he adopted a peripatetic style of life, travelling widely throughout Iran and eventually abroad. He went on to become the foremost Baha’i thinker of the first generation in Iran.63 Among the large number of other important ulama who lived for some time in Tehran were Mīrzā Ḥājar Ṣāḥib, Khwānd Mullā ʿAli Akbar Shaḥmīrzādī, and ʿĀqā Jamāl Būrūjīrdī (who was jailed in the early eighteen-seventies and conducted a lively debate with the Shīʿite ulama, and who returned later to live in the capital despite his notoriety). Ibn-i ʿAṣdaq, son of the famous Babi-Baha’i preacher Mīrzā Ṣādiq “Muqaddas” Khurṣānī, also maintained a residence in Tehran after his marriage. Ibn-i ʿAṣdaq married a minor Qajar princess, ʿAdīra Khānum, a great-grand-daughter of Muhammad Shāh, who embraced her husband’s religion. Her sister, in turn, was married to an official, Intīẓām al-Sulṭān, who became a devoted Baha’i himself.64 This Baha’i member of the ulama class, like the ʿAṭṭār merchants, was able through marriage alliances to gain the patronage of persons in the Tehran government official stratum. The very large numbers of Qajar princes and princesses produced in the massive harem of the Shāhs made even royal alliances entirely possible.
To the historian Rūḥullāh Ṣārābī we owe an important and fascinating account of the institutionalisation of the Bahā’i religion in Tehran, based on a rare nineteenth-century manuscript that he unearthed, the memoirs of Mirzā Asad Allāh Isfahānī.65 In 1877 or 1878 (1294), a copy of Bahā’u’llāh’s *Most Holy Book* came into the possession of Mirzā Asad Allāh Isfahānī, an important Bahā’i missionary and a brother-in-law of ‘Abd al-Bahā’i, Bahā’u’llāh’s eldest son. It had been written in 1873 but only gradually circulated in Iran; insofar as it formally encoded a new holy law, aimed at abrogating and supplanting the Muslim *shari‘a* or revealed law, it was an extremely dangerous book. The Qajar authorities construed possession of it as a sign of apostasy from Islam, a capital offence. Isfahānī, then residing in Tehran, read with interest Bahā’u’llāh’s command that a house of justice (*bayt al-adl*) should be established in every Bahā’i community, with nine or more members. Although the Bahā’is had ulama, it was Bahā’u’llāh’s intention that they should not achieve the sort of ecclesiastical authority which ulama had in Shi‘ite Islam, and he therefore created these lai steering committees. During this period, of the eighteen-seventies, lay committees were also frequently being set up among Ottoman millets, which challenged the authority of the clerical leaders within these millets, and in Iran, the Zoroastrians similarly had steering committees or *anjumans* on which bourgeois members of the community served, in contradistinction to the priests or *mobeds*. The call for the establishment of Bahā’i houses of justice therefore came at a time of greater laicisation of minority religious communities generally, a time when agricultural capitalism was contributing to the rise of a new, literate middle class unwilling to cede all religious power in the community to the clergy.

Mirzā Asad Allāh writes in his memoirs of 1877–80 that he secretly called a meeting in his house of eight prominent Bahā’i elders from Tehran, who began organising the community’s affairs. They sent missionaries to nearby villages, for instance, and attempted to help believers who were victimised by persecution. The rest of the community had no idea where these initiatives were coming from. Mirzā Asad Allāh was initially discouraged by the relative uninterest among the other members in committee work, and complained that if he did not call a meeting, none was held. Then Mirzā Ḥaydar ‘Ali Isfahānī and Ibn-i Ḍadāq came to Tehran in 1879 or 1880 (1297), and these two very active Bahā’i preachers and missionaries agreed enthusiastically to serve. The rest of the membership floated, and remained a secret cabal of elders. They called the building where they met a house of justice, but referred to the administrative body itself as a consultative assembly (*mahfil-i shirr*).66 This terminology appears to indicate an interest, on the local level, in democratic movements and thought, since the constitutionalist writers of the time employed the word *shirr* or *mashrur*, both meaning consultation, to refer to parliamentary sorts of governance. Bahā’u’llāh, of course, also advocated parliamentary government at the national level, but most Bahā’is were not in any position to pursue that goal practically. In their own institutions, they could, however, strive for a more collective sort of leadership, though Isfahānī’s secret council of elders was hardly at this point very democratic. Ultimately, the assembly members would be chosen by secret ballot by universal adult suffrage in the local community.

The Tehran consultative assembly drew up an important list of goals for Bahā’i who wished to spread the faith and to encourage the implementation of the laws of the *Most Holy Book*, including the wide establishment of further consultative assemblies. This list gives great insight into the thinking of Bahā’i urban leadership in the late eighteen-seventies. Such travellers were to attempt to establish in each city, town or village houses of justice where consultative assemblies would be convened. The assemblies were to discuss all matters concerning the welfare of the friends and to implement the decisions taken. They were to set up philanthropic investment trusts (*mahall al-baraka*) with capital raised from the community. Some of the profits from the investments made would be returned to the owners of the capital, and the rest spent on philanthropical projects such as succouring the Bahā’i poor and subventing the expenses of missionaries. The administration of the trust fund was to be in the hands of a committee known as the “trustees” (*umāna‘*). Bahā’u’llāh himself encouraged these institutions in numerous Tablets, writing, “God willing, the investment trust (*mahall al-baraka*) will be radiant and illuminated among treasuries (*buyut al-amwal*), and the dwelling-place of trustworthiness and piety.” He also called the trustees “blessed.” The third goal was the establishment of regular dawn prayers (*mashriq al-adhkār*), either in private homes or in a building purchased for this purpose; in some instances Bahā’is bought land and constructed on it their own building for worship, gathering at dawn in accordance with the text of the *Most Holy Book*. The fourth goal was the institution of the nineteen-day Feast, which at this time had no administrative content or purposes. Rather, every nineteen days Bahā’is were to invite co-religionists to an evening meal, after which the prayers and writings of Bahā’u’llāh were chanted. In one town, nineteen Bahā’i hosts took turns offering a meal each night of the nineteen-day Bab-i Bahā’i month, so that believers met virtually every evening. The final goal was to encourage the payment by Bahā’i of the *huqiq Allāh* or “Right of
God,” the 19% tax on net profits from certain economic activities. These monies were thought to belong to the šāhib-i amr, which is to say, to the head of the religion, Bahá’u’lláh. The tax seems to be a form of the Muslim khums, a fifth or 20% payment owed initially on booty to the Prophet Muḥammad, which Shi’ite continued to pay (on profits from some forms of trade) to the Sayyids or the Prophet’s descendants. In the Most Holy Book, Bahá’u’lláh made it clear that in future these revenues were not to be owed to his descendants but rather to the houses of justice. Many Bahá’ís paid the tax by donating property to the Bahá’í faith as a religious endowment (waqf). They sent the revenues generated by the property to Bahá’u’lláh in Acre or donated them to causes inside Iran such as spreading the religion or caring for the indigent.67

At one point, the assembly included Mirzâ Asad Allâh Isfahâni, Ibn-i Aṣdaq, Mirzâ Ḥaydar ʻAlí Isfahâni, Akhund Mullâ ʻAlí Akbar, Aqâ Mirzâ ʻAlí Naqî, Aqâ Sayyid Abū ʻAlí, Aqâ Muḥammad Kâzîm Isfahâni and Aqâ Muḥammad Karîm ʻ[Aṭţâr] the broadcloth seller. Interestingly, these members were mostly drawn from the ranks of the Bahá’í ulama, and at this point do not appear to include the Bahá’í government officials who play such a prominent role in Mázandârâni’s history of the community. Only one of the great merchants was a member. Another prominent Bahá’í preacher was then in the capital, Aqâ Jamâl Burújirdi, the scion of a distinguished family of mujtahids and himself at this time one of the major Bahá’í ulama. The Tehran house of justice decided to invite him to join, but he said he would agree only if he would be the chairman of the body. The members responded that the Most Holy Book had said nothing about there being a chairman. Because of his insistence on leadership (he is reported to have said one vote of his should equal six of anyone else’s), Aqâ Jamâl ended up being excluded from membership. He in his turn began a campaign against the whole idea that the time had come to set up such consultative assemblies. The dispute was ultimately submitted by both sides to Bahá’u’lláh. He in reply first sent a letter to Aqâ Jamâl Burújirdi, asking him to go to Mosul to preach the faith there. Then he sent a letter to the consultative assembly, saying that he was pleased with their work and encouraging them to continue. In essence, he ruled against Aqâ Jamâl, but arranged things so as to avoid humiliating the great mujtahid.68

Although Mirzâ Asad Allâh, author of the memoirs upon which this account is based, blames Aqâ Jamâl for overweening egotism, the issues here go beyond individual ambition. In the Uṣūl Shi’ite system, the mujtahid or trained jurisprudent was recognised as having a unique professional competency to settle questions in Islamic law and the laity were commanded to obey his rulings implicitly. Aqâ Jamâl envisioned the continuation this role for the ulama in the Bahá’í religion. The other members of the consultative council and Bahá’u’lláh himself, however, clearly had a more lay, egalitarian vision of community governance. A Bahá’í mujtahid in a consultative assembly only had the same vote that Aqâ Muḥammad Karîm the seller of broadcloth did.

The advent of the consultative assemblies, indeed, spelled the beginning of the end of the power of the Bahá’í ulama, as Aqâ Jamâl Burújirdi perhaps had the prescience to see. The Bahá’í ulama, being preachers dedicated to spreading the religion, tended to become well-known as Bahá’ís in any city where they resided much more quickly than did the urban notables or artisans. They often attempted to continue to make their living within the framework of Shi’ite religious institutions, the only livelihood for which they were trained. The Shi’ite clergy clearly, took an extremely disapproving view of these Bahá’í ulama, since they had all the rhetorical and literary skills of their Shi’ite counterparts, and they acted forcefully against them wherever they could. Bahá’í ulama therefore were much more peripatetic than the la notables, being exiled from city after city. Over the long term, this mobility, implicit in their style of life, told against their ability to remain in control of the consultative assemblies. Moreover, once the Bahá’í religion became a recognised phenomenon, associated with particular families, the ulama class became extremely difficult to reproduce. A Bahá’í young man could not easily go off to study for years in a Shi’ite seminary. The secular schools being set up in Tehran to train professional people such as physicians and attorneys in any case looked a great deal more inviting. Bahá’í religious meetings had no place for sermons, and therefore the community had no strong incentive systematically to hire or support Bahá’í preachers. Ideology, structures of authority, and liturgical practice within the religion, and the increasing inaccessibility of Shi’ite seminaries without, ensured that the Bahá’í ulama would die out as an identifiable social stratum. The Bahá’í religion became increasingly laïcised, anticlerical, and even somewhat anti-intellectual, as the assemblies, staffed by merchants and professional people, gained a powerful grip on community power. As a dissident religion with a strong emphasis on individual ethics and subjective spirituality, whose meetings for worship lacked a sermon or professional preacher, the Bahá’ís resemble some Western dissident groups such as the Anabaptists and Quakers (also not particularly noted for their scintillating intellectualism). Aqâ Jamâl Burújirdi and a handful of other Bahá’í ulama rebelled against Bahá’u’lláh’s chosen successor, his eldest son ʻAbd al-Bahá in the 1890s after the founder’s death. Excommunicated,
they found they had backed the wrong horse and thereafter sank into obscurity. This temporary and ultimately minor schism if anything increased the distrust among the urban notables in control of the consultative assemblies toward Baha’i ulama and hastened the ultimate demise of this latter group.69

As in Shiraz, so in Tehran, the bazaar formed one crucial site for the recruitment of believers. The Āṭṭār family with its various branches represented one of the major proponents of the Baha’i faith in the city. Mazandarani mentions that large numbers of working-class Baha’is were in danger of starving in the early eighteen-seventies. We do know the name of Ustad Husayn Na’iband Kashf, the ironsmith who pointed out contradictions in Shi’ite traditions to the learned cleric Mirza Abu ‘l-Fadl Gulpaqa, first setting him to thinking about the Baha’i religion. He was among the Baha’i artisans and shopkeepers in the city arrested in the early eighteen-eighties, along with a seal maker, various sorts of tailor, a mould caster, a dyer, a tobacco seller and a member of the Āṭṭār clan of broadcloth importers.

The naqzkar, or government official class, was more important as a source of Baha’i converts in Tehran than in Shiraz. An impressive number of these were women—‘Ismat Khunum Tā’īra, Umm al-Awliya, Fāṭima Sulṭān Khunum, and others, who clearly played an essential role in the spread and development of the religion. Bureaucrats such as Tā’īra’s brother, ‘Isa Khān, military men such as the nephew of Amin al-Sulṭān, as well as minor royalty such as Shams-i Jahān Fitna, her brother and his children and the wife of Ibn-i Aṣdaq, joined the new movement. The Āṭṭār clan even managed to marry into the naqzkar class at one point, winning over the daughter of the Shāh’s executioner! The willingness of these government-connected individuals to adopt a religion hated by their sovereign and most of their relatives and peers is something of a puzzle. Clearly, the Baha’i faith is an attractive religion, able to inspire large numbers of Iranians to take the considerable risks associated with embracing it. But in some instances we can see how its attractiveness might have been enhanced by structural conflicts within the government class. Hāji Faraj appears to have been in deep conflict with an absent father who killed Babis for a living and then died young, leaving Faraj a rebellious orphan ridden with guilt and resentment. ‘Ismat Khunum Tā’īra, a battered wife (see above, p. 135), became a Baha’i even though it was her husband’s job to imprison and execute Baha’is, hence in clear defiance of her violent mate. It should also be remembered that the government class, despite its status privileges, faced severe difficulties in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Those who were not successful in going into private landholding faced lengthy arrears in receiving their state salaries and stipends, because of the high indebtedness and virtual bankruptcy of the mismanaged Qajar state. The Shāhs’ practice of maintaining harems as large as 200 and producing immense numbers of children created a huge group of royals, many of whose ambitions could not be accommodated, some of whom became ulama or merchants. A few of these disgruntled royals adopted dissident religions such as the Baha’i faith, apparently in part as a protest against their marginalisation (though it is true that some mainstream royals adopted such heterodoxies as Shaykhism and Sufism, perhaps in rebellion against the increasing hegemony of the Uṣūlī mujāhidīs). Thus generational and gender conflicts, as well as discrepancies between ascribed status and achieved class standing, may have created discontents with the status quo that contributed to the successes of the dissident Baha’i faith among this stratum.

In contrast to Shiraz, a significant number of Tehrani Jews adopted the Baha’i faith, many of them traditionally-trained physicians. Some Zoroastrians became Baha’is as a result of Mirza Abu ‘l-Fadl’s and others’ friendly relations with Mānakji Šāhāb and his Zoroastrian school. Compared to Shiraz, the Tehran community was therefore far more diverse in the religious backgrounds of its adherents. In nineteenth-century Iran, these religious minorities faced many disabilities and were considered ritually unclean by many Shi’ites, in sharp contrast to the universalist and open attitude toward them of Baha’is from a Shi’ite background. As Smith notes, “for Iranian Jews and Zoroastrians to be treated as fellow and equal human beings by members of the dominant culture was doubtless an experience of profound significance for them.”70

The way in which these various segments of the community interacted to reinforce community loyalties is demonstrated by the story of Hāji Muḥammad Raḥim Āṭṭār’s famine relief efforts during the crisis of 1869–71. Because he had married into the government official class and because as a merchant he knew the bazaar, he was appointed by his father-in-law to help distribute bread to the indigent in the capital. He used his position to help poor Baha’is also. These links of patronage exercised in an emergency form a species of vertical integration, wherein the middle class burghers could distribute the fruits of their clientage with government figures to members of the Baha’i working class. The Tehran community appears to have been exceptionally well-organised and to have possessed perhaps the first consultative council. Run initially for the most part by the Baha’i ulama, along with a merchant or two, this body established an investment fund with which to pay for a more continuous sort of
poor relief within the community as well as to support Baha’i missionary work. The assembly saw itself as modelled on instructions in Bahá'u'lláh’s *Most Holy Book*, and helped other cities set up similar committees and investment funds. Its ethic mixed a commitment to egalitarianism (it was a committee of equals) and consultative or parliamentary discussion (*mashwurát*) with paternalism. It was not elected but formed by a network of self-appointed elders, and was wholly male. In time, these institutions came to be elected and came to include women, but this was not the case in the nineteenth century. The consultative assembly’s mild paternalism differed starkly, however, from the hierarchical and authoritarian leadership style of some Baha’i ulama, such as Aqá Jamal Burújjírdí. The assemblies clearly had advantages, of organisation and scriptural authorisation, which allowed them to win out over the ulama not affiliated with them. This form of organisation probably helps account for the concerted spread of the faith and the smooth functioning of the urban community. Bahá’u’lláh’s command that a substantial religious tax, the Right of God, be paid to these institutions, and then increased through wise investment, helped fund the assemblies at an impressive level. The attention of Baha’is such as Tá’ír and Dr. ‘Atá’ Alláh to establishing schools for Baha’i boys and girls (as mandated in the *Most Holy Book*) also helped consolidate the community in the long run.

4. Conclusion

The contrast between the rise of the Baha’i faith in Iran (1865–92) with the rise of the Babi movement (1844–52) could not be more stark. The Babis were perceived as an intolerable threat to the state and to the Shi’ite religion and were willing to fight for what they saw as the right. As a result of this polarisation, major battles broke out in some provincial places, such as Zanjan, Nayriz and the shrine of Shaykh Tabarsi in Mazandaran. The failed Babi attempt in 1852 to assassinate the Sháh resulted in a severe countrywide pogrom against the Babis. While the Baha’is, themselves largely from a Babi background, suffered some continued stigma because of this association, their movement met with quite a different response. Although the state and the clergy occasionally attempted to use coercion to harass and slow the progress of the religion, there was nothing like a military siege of an entire quarter or village where Baha’is clustered. Rather, the Baha’is achieved an uneasy coexistence with Shi’ite society, one characterised by continuous informal vandalism and discrimination against members of the new religion and occasional major episodes of persecution, but also by frequent acquiescence on the part of the state in its *de facto* spread and importance.

Minor members of the Qajar royal family adopted the religion, as did state officials who served as high functionaries (e.g. Mushír al-Mulk in Shiraz; also, it should be noted that the chief minister (vízíyer) of Khurasan and the governor of Bushire at one point were both Baha’is). Non-Baha’i patricians such as Qávám al-Mulk offered their patronage to important Baha’i commercial clans such as the Afnáns, and this is paralleled by Rájím Kháñ, the Sháh’s executioner, protecting the ‘Aṭṭār merchants and their clients in Tehran. The punctuated equilibrium of state-Baha’i relations is partially accounted for by the reformist ideology of the Baha’is, which aimed at parliamentary, consultative government, low taxes, universal education, adoption of Western science and technology, a limited military institution, an improved status for women and steps toward a world government and society. While some of these Baha’i goals were anathema to many quasi-feudal Qajar nobles, the Baha’is advocated them peacefully and quietly, showing that they were not an immediate challenge. Reformist high officials, such as the sometime prime minister Mírza Ḥusáín Kháñ Múshír al-Dawla, even looked upon the new religion positively once they understood its social programme. One source of Baha’i success, in both Shiraz and Tehran, was therefore a relatively low level of state intervention against the religion (in each city there was only one major episode of large-scale arrest in our period, resulting in three judicial murders in Shiraz, while all the other detainees were released, though other executions of individual Baha’is in the two cities took place). This relative reluctance to intervene reflected the reformist rather than revolutionary stance of the Baha’is, rendering them no immediate threat to the state, as well as the divided opinions within the state about the movement and its lack of resources to mount another major, country-wide pogrom even had it so desired.

The Baha’i community, despite its majority of impoverished artisans and villagers, possessed substantial monetary resources. Great merchants such as the Afnán and ‘Aṭṭār clans (as well as the Nahrí of Isfahan and the Bárí of Qazvin and Rasht) were among the chief beneficiaries of economic developments in the late nineteenth century. The Afnán’s import-export house profited from the new cash crops, and the ‘Aṭṭār appear to have retailed British manufactured broadcloth to Tehranis. The government officials who became Baha’is also, often brought substantial wealth to the community. More important, high officials who were sympathetic to the cause or actually embraced the new religion were in a position to benefit it enormously by their patronage. In Tabas the governor, a Baha’i, “chose a very beautiful building as the place where the Baha’i meet-
ings were to be held,” and attracted many important people locally to the religion. Baha‘is attribute to Qavam al-Mulk and to Raḥīm Khān the ability at some points to ward off hostile action against the Baha‘is on the part of other officials or the clergy.

One is struck by the centrality of the rise of agricultural capitalism as a context for the development of the Baha‘i faith in Shiraz. There may, in fact, be a parallel between the pivotal role played in the development of early modern capitalism by confessional groups such as Calvinists and Mennonites in Lutheran and Catholic Germany, and the role played by Iranian religious minorities (Jews, Zoroastrians, Armenians, Babis and Baha‘is) in developing capitalist institutions in late nineteenth-century Shi‘ite Iran. This link between religious minority status and an active role in capitalist innovation may have had something to do with specific religious ideologies, but it may be seen more as an outcome of structural, social tensions. Religious minorities, in both instances, had the advantage of being on the whole barred from openly taking an active part in high politics, so that they were encouraged to focus on commerce. Moreover, they suffered from great local vulnerability, leading them to seek strenuously the security offered by liquid wealth. The Afšān and ʿAṭṭār clans' ideological attraction to a dissident religion like the Baha‘i faith may have been bound up with an image of themselves as heroic entrepreneurs fighting off the rapaciousness of parasitical feudal nobles and of the predatory foreign joint-stock companies that were coming to dominate Iranian economic life. The Baha‘i faith may have had the virtues, for them, of being both recognisably modern in its values and its social gospel and authentically Iranian.

In another way, the phenomenon of the rise of great Baha‘i commercial houses parallels wider developments in Qajar society. Iran in this period was increasingly characterised by a situation of “weak state, strong society.” Whereas merchants and officials could profit enormously from the commodity export trade, the state lacked the power and organisation to tax this sector efficiently, sinking into royal and bureaucratic penury. Urbanisation and religious pluralism, it has been suggested, are conducive to greater religious participation, and although pluralism was limited in Qajar Iran by the state’s alliance with Shi‘ism as the official religion, the weakness of the government allowed more pluralism than might have appeared on the surface. The new Baha‘i religion, and especially its bourgeois stratum, was an emblem of the strong society in the face of the weak state.

To conclude, then, the Baha‘is gained the adherence of thousands of urban artisans and rural peasants, whose popular culture was less under surveillance and less amenable to control by the state and the clergy than was that of the literate strata. They attracted some important members of the commercial and government elites. Both elite and working-class women embraced the new religion, which was in theory substantially less patriarchal than Shi‘ite Islam, and gender segregation in Iranian society left women leaders free to make a powerful impact among female networks. Prominent Baha‘is from the Sayyid caste (such as the Afšān family), recognised as descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, could often employ their religious charisma to protect themselves and other community members. Baha‘is from the ulama class preached and wrote actively, employing all the considerable tools gained from their training in Shi‘ite seminaries in the service of the new faith. Internally, Baha‘is organised consultative assemblies and sophisticated investment funds, staffed by Baha‘i ulama and merchants, to increase the solidarity of the community through charity work and to spread the religion through concerted missionary efforts. They could accomplish all this because the conflicts in Qajar Iran between the clerics and the state, and between some government officials and their rivals, created slippages in official Shi‘ite authority, spaces of culture and power in which Baha‘is could manoeuvre, survive and sometimes even flourish.

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1 I was provided with rare manuscript material, without which this paper would have been much poorer in detail, by Ruhollah Mihrabkhani, Moejan Momen, John Walbridge and Richard Hollinger. I am, needless to say, exceedingly grateful to them for their kindness and generosity. John Walbridge and Susan Stiles Maneck made important comments on an early draft, but the errors that remain are my own.


3 The standard account of the whole sweep of this religion is Peter Smith, The Babi and Baha‘i Religions: From Messianic Shi‘ism to a World Religion (Cambridge, 1987). The sudden emergence of a liberal group from a much more conservative one has happened elsewhere; after all, Unitarianism developed out of Calvinism, Puritan Congregationalism in early nineteenth century New England, though admittedly without the messianic element characterising the Baha‘is. What is interesting is that the Unitarians have grown increasingly more liberal over time, whereas in significant ways Baha‘is turned toward antiliberalism in the twentieth century.

4 Charles Tilly, From Mobilization to Revolution (Reading, Mass., 1978); M. Zald and J. McCarthy (eds.), The Dynamics of Social Movements (Cambridge, Mass., 1979); idem (eds.), Social Movements in an Organizational Society (New Brunswick, N.J., 1987); the virtues of this approach to the study of the Babi and Baha‘i movements was first suggested by Peter Smith of
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8 For Iranian merchants in this period, see Migeod, Die persische Gesellschaft, pp. 179-94; and Floor, "The Merchants (majjaz)," ZDMG CXXVI (1970), pp. 101-32.

9 For the nature of the state bureaucracy in this period, see A. Reza Sheikholislami, "The Patronial Structure of Iranian Bureaucracy in the Late Nineteenth Century," Iranian Studies XI (1978), pp. 199-258.

10 Fadl Mazandarani, "Târikhi zuhir al-laqq, Vol. VI, ms. uncatalogued copy in Afânir Library, London, pp. 861-62. Mazandarani was a towering scholar of the Iranian Baha'i community who lived in the first half of the twentieth century. His nine-volume "History of the Manifestation of the Truth" is an invaluable chronicle (including many original documents) of the history of the Babi and Baha'i religions, 1844-1921. Only volumes III and VIII have been published, and contemporary Baha'i authorities have refused to allow adherents to publish the remaining volumes.


13 John L. Esposito, The Islamic City of Shiraz, Research Papers 7 (Department of Geography, University of Durham, 1963), pp. 10-11; for a contemporary poem describing the earthquake, see Hasan Imdadi, Shiraz dar gushta va hal (Shiraz, 1960), p. 45-46.


15 Laurence D. Loeb, Outcaste Jewish Life in Southern Iran (New York, 1977), esp. ch. 3.

16 See Imdadi, Shiraz dar gushta, pp. 504-15 for some nineteenth century mystical figures.

17 For the idea of a "central place" in Iran, see Bonine, Yazd and its Hinterland: A Central Place System of Dominance in the Iranian Plateau (Marburg, 1980).

18 Thomson, in Issawi, Economic History of Iran, p. 28.

19 Roger T. Olson, "Persian Gulf Trade and the Agricultural Economy of Southern Iran in the Nineteenth Century," in Bonine and Keddie (eds.), Modern Iran, pp. 173-89; Bémont, Villes, II, pp. 146-47; Vahid F. Nowshirwan, "The Beginnings of Commercial Agriculture in Iran," in Abrahim Udovitch (ed.), The Islamic Middle East, 700-1900: Studies in Economic and Social History (Princeton, 1977), pp. 547-91; Gad Gilbar, "Persian Agriculture in the late Qajar Period, 1860-1906," Asian and African Studies XXII (1978), pp. 312-65. An overview of the period from a Wallersteinian, dependency-theory point of view is John Foran, Fragile Resistance: Social Transformation in Iran from 1500 to the Revolution (Boulder, Colo., 1993), pp. 107-51; while this approach has much to recommend it, one must guard against downplaying local dynamics and overemphasizing the role and impact of Europe. External trade is seldom more than 15% or so of an economy like that of Qajar Iran.


21 A major secondary source on this family is Muhammad Ali Fadîy, Khânând-i Afnân, Sînâr-î Bahâ'llah (Tehran, 127 B.E./1971); for our period, this source mostly replicates information available in the primary account, Mirzâ Habîb Allah Afnân, "Târikhi amiri-î Shirâz," copy of uncatalogued Persian ms., Afânir Library, London, and I will keep most citations to the latter.


25 Khadijih Begum, quoted in Balyuzi, Khadijih Begum, pp. 30-31.

26 Ibid., p. 31.

27 Habíb Allah, "Shirâz," p. 177; Mazandarâni, Târikhi zuhir, loc. cit.


34 Habíb Allah, "Shirâz," pp. 191-220; Mazandarani, "Târikhi zuhir," vol. VI, pp. 858-61; Mazandarâni gives the date of the arrests as 1287/1870-71, but identifies the prince who ordered the arrests as Husâm al-Saltana; at this time Zill al-Salîn was governor of Fars (Fasî-i, Persia, p. 386). Mazandarani gives the date of the executions as 1287/1871-72; but this appears to be an error. British intelligence reports on southern Iran say three "Babís," who had been imprisoned for some time, were executed between 14 December 1874 and 16 January 1875 (Ali Akbar Sa'îdi Sirjani (ed.), Vâpqî-'i ittińiyây (Tehran, 1982), p. 26); Husâm al-Saltana was reinstated as governor of Fars early in 1874. It seems likely, that the arrests were made in 1870 or 1871 at the order of Zill al-Salîn, but that the executions were carried out at the order of Husâm al-Saltana, probably late in 1874 (1291).


36 Muhammad Tâhir Mâlamûrî, Khânând-i Mâlamûrî (Langenhain, 1992), pp. 96-98, 125.

37 Momen, "The Bahá'í Community of Ashkhabad: Its Social Basis and Importance in Bahá'í History," in Shirin Akiner


Mazandarani, Tārikh-i zuhūr, vol. VI, pp. 441-42.

Ibid., vol. VI, pp. 444-50.


Margaret Catton, “Bahā’ī Influences on Mirza ʿAbdallah, Qajar Court Musician and Master of the Radif,” in Cole and Momen (eds.), From Iran East and West, Studies in Bahā’ī and Bahā’ī History Volume 2 (Los Angeles, 1984), pp. 31-64.


Susan S Ùles, “Early Zoroastrian Conversions to the Bahā’ī Faith in Yazd, Iran,” in Cole and Momen (eds.), From Iran East and West, pp. 67-93.

Mīrābẖānī, “Maḥfil-i shur dar ʿahd-i Jāmā’ī-i Aqādās-Abbāh,” Payām-i Bahā’ī, XXVIII (February 1982), pp. 9-11; XXIX (March 1982), pp. 8-9; based on Mirza Asad Allah, Yād-dāšt-hā, Persian ms., xeroxed copy kindly provided to this author by Mīrābẖānī.


Ibid., vol. XIX, pp. 9.


Burtjifi’s biography is given in Mazandarani, “Tārikh-i zuhūr,” vol. VI, pp. 390-14.

Smith, Bahā’ī and Bahā’ī Religions, p. 97.

For Mirzā Muhammad Rida Mu’tamam al-Salţāna, the long-time vizier of Khurasan, see Balyuzi, Eminent Bahais, pp. 52-59; the Bushire official in question was Sa’d al-Mulk; his brother, Nizām al-Salṭāna, also advanced in government despite his Bahā’ī adherence: PRO, FO 60/493, Ross to Wolseley, 25 August 1888, enclosed in Wolseley to Salisbury, no. 178, 8 September 1888, repr. in Momen, Bahī and Bahā’ī Religions, pp. 246-47. Other figures who might have been Bahā’īs are mentioned in some sources. Mirzā Ḥusayn Khān Abādī was appointed the superintendent (mubashir) of Abada, where there was a large Bahā’ī population. In April 1887, however, he was removed from this post, imprisoned, bastinadoed, and sent to Isfahan with his brother, on charges of being a Bahā’ī (Babi). It seems likely that the government’s displeasure with him had other origins, but that when it was decided to move against him, the fact of his adherence to the Bahā’ī faith made it easier: Sirjani, ed., Vagā’ī-yi stīpmāyita, p. 286 (dispatch of 19 Rajab 1354/13 April 1887, report for British of local events in southern Iran, in Persian). Since malcontents were often accused of Bahaism in Qajar Iran, however, it is difficult to be sure that persons such as Abādī were actually Bahā’īs.

Iṣfahānī, Delight of Hearts, p. 119.
