

# Millennialism and Violence

## The Attempted Assassination of Nasir al-Din Shah of Iran by the Babis in 1852

---

Moojan Momen

**ABSTRACT:** The association of millennialist movements with violence has been a subject of much study following recent high-profile events. This article examines a case of millennialism and violence that occurred just over 150 years ago. It tracks the events leading to the attempted assassination of Nasir al-Din Shah of Iran in 1852 by a small group of followers of the religion of the Bab, a religious leader who claimed to fulfill the prophecies of Shi'i Islam about the coming of the Imam Mahdi. The factors leading to the violence are analyzed and compared with other cases of millennialism and violence. The main factors that stand out in this case include: a pre-existing religious milieu that expected a violent, millennial event and engendered a radically dualist worldview, with the shah's government as the embodiment of an evil destined to be defeated and removed; a severe persecution of the group resulting in some followers' desire for revenge and a dramatic violent act that would bring divine intervention and ultimate victory; government removal of moderate leadership, leaving only radical extremist leaders; and the presence among the Tehran group of Babis, which carried out the attempted assassination, of a charismatic leader whom these Babis believed had access to a source of divine power that could make the plan achievable, when a more rational analysis would have demonstrated the opposite.

The topic of millennialism and violence has come very much to the fore in the aftermath of a number of episodes occurring just before the end of the second Christian millennium—the 1993

*Nova Religio: The Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions*, Volume 12, Issue 1, pages 57–82, ISSN 1092-6690 (print), 1541-8480 (electronic). © 2008 by The Regents of the University of California. All rights reserved. Please direct all requests for permission to photocopy or reproduce article content through the University of California Press's Rights and Permissions website, at <http://www.ucpressjournals.com/reprintinfo.asp>. DOI: 10.1525/nr.2008.12.1.57

Branch Davidian tragedy; the deaths associated with the Solar Temple in 1994, 1995 and 1997; Aum Shinrikyô's release of sarin gas in Matsumoto in 1994 and on the Tokyo subway in 1995; and the Heaven's Gate group suicide in 1997. These events concentrated the minds of a number of scholars on investigating the relation of millennialist groups to violence. In this article, I will look at events that caused a small group within a nineteenth-century Iranian religious movement, the Babis, to turn to violence, and in particular the events that led to the 1852 attempted assassination of Nasir al-Din Shah in Iran. I will seek to demonstrate that in this particular case, it was not only attacks upon the group but also a pre-existing religious milieu, the presence of a millennialist vision seemingly in danger of being shattered, the rise of an extremist leader with charismatic authority, and the removal of moderate leaders that led a small group of Babis toward violence.

### EARLY BABI MOVEMENT

The Babi movement began in Iran in response to claims put forward in 1844 by Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad Shirazi, who took the title of the Bab. For eight years, it caused a considerable stir in Iran. The claim of the Bab to be the bearer of a new revelation from God abrogating Islam challenged religious institutions and political institutions, since the claim of a new revelation from God implied a claim to ultimate authority. At their height, the Babis may have been as many as 100,000, constituting as much as two percent of the population.<sup>1</sup> The religious and political leaders in Iran—the Shi'i *ulama* and the Qajar king—responded to this challenge by mobilizing against the new movement. Initially, the response was one of polemic waged by Muslim clerics against the new movement and an attempt by political authorities to confine the Bab and restrict access to him.

In the autumn of 1848, following the death of Muhammad Shah and the accession of Nasir al-Din Shah, there was a pronounced change in government policy. A local altercation between the Babis and a Muslim religious leader in the northern province of Mazandaran was turned by the new Prime Minister, the Amir Kabir, into a showdown with the new religion. Authorities instituted a siege of a few hundred Babis in Mazandaran, whom they vigorously pursued with several thousand royal troops and batteries of artillery. This episode was followed in 1850 by conflicts in Zanjan in the northwest and Nayriz in the south; in both towns, a large royal army was sent against the Babis, killing thousands of them and defeating them. With the execution that year of the Bab, the Qajar regime probably thought it had solved the Babi problem and turned its attention elsewhere.

Although the Babi movement has been compared to another millennialist movement, the Taiping revolt in China that occurred at much

the same time,<sup>2</sup> there seems little to justify this comparison. Hong Xiu-Quan, founder of the Taiping movement, clearly intended to bring about a worldly kingdom by defeating the Manchu dynasty and overthrowing the Confucian system. A military conflict was therefore inherent in his movement from the beginning.<sup>3</sup> The Bab, in contrast, addressed his letters to Muhammad Shah in the early years of his ministry in a respectful tone and stressed his desire that Muhammad Shah investigate and champion the cause of the Bab. Even after Muhammad Shah, influenced by his Prime Minister, had refused to meet the Bab and imprisoned him in a remote corner of Iran, or after the persecution and massacre of thousands of his followers at the hands of Nasir al-Din Shah and Amir Kabir, the Bab condemned these actions but did not call on his followers to rise up against either shah.

The Bab's conciliatory attitude does not mean, however, that his claim was not challenging for both the state and the clerical class. His claim to be the Twelfth Imam, the long-promised Imam Mahdi, was itself a challenge in that Shi'i doctrine holds that all political and religious authority lies with the Imam. In Shi'i Islam, there were twelve Imams who were relatives and descendants of the Prophet Muhammad and his legitimate successors but whose position was usurped. The twelfth of these is said to have gone into hiding in A.H. 260/873 C.E. and is expected to return. While the Imam is absent, the political and religious leadership claim authority only as his deputies. Therefore the Bab's 1848 assertion that he was the Imam amounted to a claim to ultimate political and religious leadership. Nor can it be denied that the Bab was at times confrontational. In his writings he effectively abrogated the power of the clerical class and even prohibited precisely the sort of learning on which their claims to authority were based. His instructions for the Babis to gather at Karbala in 1844 could be seen as a threat by the authorities, as could his 1848 call for a Black Standard to be raised in Khurasan and for his followers to proceed there. Both these calls were in direct fulfillment of Shi'i messianic and apocalyptic prophecies about what the Imam would do on his return. The confrontational aspect of the latter call was heightened by the fact that the raising of the Black Standard in Khurasan had in early Islamic history led to the overthrow of the first Islamic dynasty and thus had strong political connotations. In all this, however, the Bab never called on his followers to take any violent action—indeed he strongly exhorted them against such a course. In summary, the Bab was challenging and confrontational but his strategy included no recourse to violence.

In this article, I will concentrate on what happened among a group of Babis in the capital city of Tehran during the two years after the 1850 execution of the Bab, events that led to the attempted assassination of Nasir al-Din Shah. This group included a number of important Babi leaders, and there is interesting evidence of the internal dynamics as

one particular leader took control of the group. The assassination attempt itself was a failure and triggered a country-wide crackdown resulting in the executions of many Babis and the near extinction of the movement.

### MILLENNIALISM AND VIOLENCE

A number of terms—such as apocalyptic, millennialist, messianic—are often used interchangeably to describe religious groups but in fact have subtle differences of meaning. For the purposes of this article, I use the following definitions: a group is apocalyptic when it is focused upon the near advent of the end of the world or at least of a major upheaval; a group is millennialist when, in addition to this upheaval, it also believes in the near advent of a Golden Age of peace, either after the apocalyptic upheaval or before the end of the world. Thus, a group is millennialist when, as defined by Norman Cohn, it believes in a salvation that is collective, this-worldly, imminent, total (in that it will utterly transform life on Earth), and miraculous (brought about by supernatural means).<sup>4</sup> A group is messianic when it expects the imminent advent of a savior figure who will inaugurate the apocalypse and/or the Golden Age.

In Shi'i Islam, the religion of the majority of Iranians, there is the expectation of a messianic figure, the return of the Twelfth Imam. This return has apocalyptic implications: there will be warfare, a great defeat inflicted upon the enemies of Shi'ism (first and foremost the Sunnis), and the conquest of the world. It also has millennialist implications: the Imam will rule the world with justice and in accordance with Shi'i Islam.<sup>5</sup> Emotive annual commemorations of the martyrdoms of the Shi'i Imams, especially the third Imam, Husayn, keep the return of the Twelfth Imam, who will redress all wrongs, very much to the forefront of people's minds. Catherine Wessinger has described two types of millennialism: catastrophic millennialism anticipates a sudden and usually violent overthrow of the present order by a superhuman agency (usually God); and progressive millennialism looks to a gradual improvement in human circumstances carried out by humans (albeit often under the guidance of a superhuman agency).<sup>6</sup> In this classification, Shi'i Islam is clearly of the catastrophic variety, in that with the coming of the Twelfth Imam there will be an apocalyptic battle in which the forces of the Imams will defeat their enemies and then the world will be filled with justice.

It should perhaps be noted that the year 1844, when the Bab first raised his claim, was the Islamic year 1260, exactly one thousand Islamic years after the Twelfth Imam went into hiding. There was considerable expectation in the Shi'i world that this millennial year would be the year of the Imam's return. The Babi movement was thus literally millennialist.

By 1852 the Babis believed that the Bab had been the return of the Twelfth Imam and the inaugurator of a new religious dispensation; a great wrong had been done when Babis were killed in Mazandaran, Zanzan and Nayriz; and an even greater wrong had been done when the Bab himself had been executed. The Bab, however, had turned his followers' attention towards a future in which another messianic figure would appear: "He whom God shall make manifest" (*man yuzhiruhullāh*). In the major writings of the Bab, such as the *Persian Bayan*, there are many references to Shi'i apocalyptic prophecies, explaining these as metaphorical references to spiritual events that had come to pass with the coming of the Bab. It is clear that the Bab did not expect any literal, physical fulfillment of the apocalyptic prophecies of Shi'i Islam.<sup>7</sup> The Bab also looked forward to the setting up of a future Babi state with a Babi king. In sum, the Bab sought to turn the catastrophic millennialism of Shi'i Islam into a progressive millennialism. There were, however, serious difficulties in conveying this change of vision to the Babis at large. For nearly his entire short ministry of six years, the Bab was either imprisoned in remote fortresses or under house arrest. It was difficult for him to meet with followers. In addition, his books were written in Arabic or a difficult Persian that made them inaccessible to most Babis. Furthermore, the catastrophic millennialism of Shi'i Islam was so strongly imbued in Iranian culture and so frequently reinforced by popular commemorations and recitals that the change to a different type of millennialist vision would have been difficult even if the Bab had better means of communications with his followers.

It should also be mentioned that Shi'i Islam inherently possesses two radically opposite models for human action. Most Shi'i Imams are seen as having been relentlessly persecuted, accepting it with meekness and fortitude. Patient acceptance of persecution can be seen as the first model for Babi action that was prevalent in the early Babi period. When the persecutions became severe and caused deaths of Babis, however, some Babis felt justified in turning to the other Shi'i model, that of the Imam Husayn, who refused to submit to injustice and asserted his rights against the forces of evil (which eventually overwhelmed him and led to his martyrdom). This model justified the Babis in defending themselves against their enemies—especially since the Twelfth Imam was expected to adopt this more militant model upon his return.<sup>8</sup>

### THE BABI UPHEAVALS

As already described, from 1848 onwards the Babis in Iran came under increasing pressure from Iranian religious and political leaders. The first major episode occurred when a group of Babis, including several prominent leaders of the movement, were attacked by a mob in the town of Barfurush in Mazandaran and retired to a shrine called Shaykh

Tabarsi. Here they were surrounded at first by local militia and then by royal troops and artillery. Despite the fact that the Babis had no military training and were poorly armed, they managed to hold out against the royal army for seven months, inflicting several defeats on their besiegers. They only eventually succumbed to a ruse by the royal prince leading the government forces, who swore on the Qur'an not to harm them if they emerged, and then promptly massacred them when they did so.

Probably of greatest importance for the purposes of this article is the fact that the Babis, and even some of their opponents, saw this as a reenactment of events at Karbala<sup>9</sup> twelve hundred years earlier when the Imam Husayn, grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, was surrounded and killed by forces of the Umayyad caliph. This is the most emotive event in Shi'i history, endlessly retold and commemorated in public devotions. One Babi-Baha'i history put the following words into the mouth of the military leader of the royal forces:

The truth of the matter is that anyone who had not seen Karbilā would, if he had seen Tabarsī, not only have comprehended what there took place, but would have ceased to consider it and had he seen Mullā Husayn of Bushrūyih he would have been convinced that the Chief of Martyrs [Imam Husayn] had returned to earth; and had he witnessed my deeds he would assuredly have said: "This is Shimr [the killer of Imam Husayn] come back with sword and lance."<sup>10</sup>

A further factor was the doctrine of Return (*raj'ah* or *raj'at*). When the Twelfth Imam appeared there would also occur a "Return" of the other Imams (as well as their martyred followers) and their enemies (Yazid, Shimr and the rest of the Umayyad and 'Abbasid caliphs and allies) leading to an apocalyptic battle in which the forces of good would finally defeat the forces of evil. The Bab had reinterpreted and given great importance to this doctrine of Return. It referred, he taught, not to the appearance of the self-same persons who lived a thousand years ago but to the appearance of individuals who displayed the same characteristics as those persons—whether support and loyalty to a holy figure or enmity and hatred towards him. Thus the shah was not just *compared to* Yazid, the caliph who had ordered the death of the Imam Husayn, he was the *Return of* Yazid, and it was the duty of all true believers to fight Yazid and his forces.

Persecution of the Babis and execution of the Bab were identified with events in Shi'i sacred history—persecution of the Imams and martyrdom of the Imam Husayn—and reinforced by the doctrine of Return. For the Babis, a cosmic myth was being played out in their lifetimes and, as all Shi'is knew from childhood, when it was played out for the second time with the coming of the Twelfth Imam, the result would be the defeat and death of Yazid and all forces opposing the Imams.

The defeat of the Babis at Shaykh Tabarsi was followed by two further sieges in 1850: at Zanjan, which went on for eight months and resulted in the gradual attrition of the Babi defenders by government forces; and at Nayriz, where after an unsuccessful two-month campaign the commander of government forces used trickery and betrayal to bring the Babis out from behind their defenses and then massacred them. In the accounts of these episodes comparisons are drawn with the martyrdom of Imam Husayn and his companions.<sup>11</sup> Tehran itself had its share of Babi martyrs in 1850 when seven were publicly executed. This event was also linked in Babi sacred history with a prophecy regarding the coming of the Imam Mahdi.<sup>12</sup>

By the end of 1850, Babis everywhere were in disarray. They had lost almost their entire leadership and much of their rank-and-file, and they were being driven underground by the country's relentlessly hostile religious and political leadership. Most important, they had lost their leader, the Bab, who was executed in July 1850. This fact is important to the examination here for two reasons. First, the execution created in the minds of certain Babis the desire for revenge for the death of the Bab and their fellow-believers. Studies of millennialist groups have found that time and again it is either persecution or a sense of being persecuted that turns these groups towards violence (see discussion below). Second, and probably more important, it removed the calming and pacifying effects of the Bab's leadership. Most Shi'is had grown up believing that when the Twelfth Imam appeared, he would lead Shi'is to a glorious victory against their opponents. Thus when the Bab claimed to be the Twelfth Imam, the natural expectation of his followers was that sooner or later he would call them to jihad, holy war. The Bab, however, refused to act in accordance with this image. In his writings, he made jihad conditional upon his call for one, which never came. Instead, he preferred to dwell upon the battle against one's own selfish desires and corrupt inclinations. As mentioned above, he tried to move the Babis away from the catastrophic millennialism of Shi'i Islam into a progressive millennialist mode, looking forward to the establishment of Babi states and kings. We will see the significance of the removal of calming and controlling agencies operating again as the story proceeds.

### **THE TEHRAN BABIS 1850–1852**

With the removal of the Bab and most of the leading Babis, there was chaos and no clear leadership in the Babi community. In Tehran, there were perhaps some 200 to 300 Babis. With the elimination of many of the leaders, a small number of people emerged as contenders for leadership. Perhaps the most commanding presence among these was Shaykh 'Ali Turshizi, a cleric from the northeast region of Khurasan

known as 'Azim (the mighty). Always one of the more militant Babis, he had tried to organize a rescue of the Bab when the latter was being taken under armed guard past Tehran. The above-mentioned episode of the seven martyrs of Tehran may have been caused partly by the discovery of certain of his plans by a government spy.<sup>13</sup> Another contender for leadership was Sayyid Basir Hindi, a blind Indian who was a compelling orator and asserted that his writings were inspired by the Bab. Mixing in Hindu beliefs regarding reincarnation, he claimed to be the return of the Imam Husayn. For six months these two competed with each other for the leadership of the Tehran Babis.<sup>14</sup> It appears that 'Azim won since Sayyid Basir left Tehran for Isfahan and eventually Luristan in southeast Iran, where he was put to death by the Qajar prince governor there in late 1851.

Also contending for leadership in Tehran was Mirza Yahya Nuri, who had the title Azal. He had a number of letters from the Bab that bestowed upon him a certain degree of leadership, but he appears to have deferred in most respects to 'Azim. Although he tried to maintain some authority, his youth (he was only about twenty years old) would have made it impossible for him to assert very much leadership.

Azal's half-brother, Mirza Husayn 'Ali Nuri—known at this time as Baha or Jinab-i Baha, but much better known by his later title of Baha'u'llah—put forward no formal claims to leadership but was in many ways the organizer of the Tehran group. His home in Tehran was a meeting place for the Babis and a residence for Babi travelers from other parts of Iran. His wealth financed Babi activities and supported many of the Babis made destitute by the persecutions.

A prominent Babi in Tehran, the poet Tahirih Qurrat al-'Ayn, was one of the Letters of the Living (the first disciples of the Bab and the highest ranking echelon of the movement). She would have outranked the male contenders for leadership, but was imprisoned in the house of Mahmud Khan, *kalantar* (mayor) of Tehran. Communication with her was therefore very difficult. Another Letter of the Living, Sayyid Husayn Yazdi, who had been the Bab's secretary and close companion, had been languishing in the shah's dungeons in Tehran since the execution of the Bab in 1850.

The 1848–1850 defeats and executions must have been experienced by many Babis not so much as contradicting Babi prophecy (since the Bab never made any prophecies of imminent victory), but as dashing Shi'i expectations of victories attending the companions of the Twelfth Imam on his return.<sup>15</sup> When the Bab announced he had brought a new religious revelation, with its own holy book and religious laws that replaced those of Islam, a number of Babis left the movement: it was the Shi'i understanding that when the Twelfth Imam returned he would promote Shi'i Islam, not found a new religion.<sup>16</sup> We can surmise that as a result of these defeats, the intense persecution of this period and the

disconfirmation of expectations, many others either concealed their belief or left the Babi movement.

Two different tendencies appeared among those who remained active Babis in Tehran. The first consisted of people who wanted to struggle on and achieve the victory prophesied in the Shi'i traditions. They may be described as clinging to the Shi'i catastrophic type of millennialism. They were also motivated by a desire for vengeance against the shah for the execution of the Bab. This group was led by 'Azim and Azal and was meeting at the house of Sulayman Khan, a wealthy Babi whose family members were in court circles. The second tendency was to disown any violent action and look rather to the texts of the Bab exhorting followers to high ideals of virtue as the way to attract others to the new religion. Those who followed this tendency may be said to have switched to a progressive type of millennialism. They were led by Baha'u'llah and met in his house. This was not a clear-cut division and many probably attended both meetings.

At this time two things occurred that were major factors leading to the adoption of violence by a group from the Tehran Babi community. In early June 1851, Prime Minister Amir Kabir, realizing the important role that Baha'u'llah played in the Babi community, instructed Baha'u'llah to go on a pilgrimage to the Shi'i shrines in Iraq. This was the standard government euphemism for exiling someone from Iran. The removal of Baha'u'llah, who had always put a brake on the more extreme and excitable elements in the Babi community, inevitably resulted in the balance shifting towards those elements. 'Azim and Azal began to make plots to overthrow the Qajar rule and install a Babi state.<sup>17</sup> Baha'u'llah, at Kirmanshah on his way to Iraq, heard of these proceedings and sent Nabil back to Tehran with orders to take Azal to Shahrud to avert trouble. But Azal refused to leave Tehran.<sup>18</sup>

The second unsettling factor was the arrival in Tehran of Husayn Jan Milani, a young weaver from the northwest province of Adharbayjan. He had been a Babi for only about a year and took up residence in a caravanserai outside the Darvazih Naw (New Gate) in Tehran. After a few days, Mulla 'Abdu'l-Karim Qazvini introduced him to Haji Sulayman Khan, who liked the young man and invited him to stay at his house. Within a short time, Husayn Jan, who possessed the gift of oratory, had attracted around himself the group of Babis who met at the house of Sulayman Khan.<sup>19</sup> He was soon putting forward the claim of being the return of the Imam Husayn, and his acolytes were prostrating themselves before him. He had thus succeeded in transforming a historical and mythical figure into an immediate reality for his followers. He had, partially at least, transferred the charismatic authority of the Imam Husayn onto himself. Sulayman Khan, for whom the dictates of hospitality decreed that he could not leave his home while he had guests, found himself virtually a prisoner in his own house.

## EVENTS LEADING UP TO THE ATTEMPTED ASSASSINATION

In November 1851 Prime Minister Amir Kabir was dismissed from his post and sent into exile in Kashan. In January 1852 he was murdered on orders from the shah by having his veins cut. This event was greeted with much satisfaction by Babis, who believed that much of their persecution and the Bab's execution were caused by this man. The next Prime Minister, Mirza Aqa Khan Nuri, was distantly related to Baha'u'llah; shortly after his assumption of office, he wrote to Baha'u'llah in Iraq asking him to return to Tehran.

In the meantime, there were major developments among the Babis in Tehran, who were meeting in great secrecy for fear of the authorities at the home of Haji Sulayman Khan. There appears to have been a marked turn towards an aggressive stance against the shah and the government. Mazandarani states that 'Azim and Azal began to accumulate weapons and talk of revenge.<sup>20</sup> They wrote to Babis in other parts of Iran asking them to come to Tehran and assist in their plans. In any case, a number of Babis from other parts of Iran, such as Nayriz, had fled to Tehran as a result of the persecutions in their hometowns, thus augmenting the numbers in the town.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, Azal took on a number of elevated titles such as Thamarih Bayan (fruit of the *Bayan*), while 'Azim took the title of Sultan Mansur (victorious king).

Although Baha'u'llah was back in Tehran by May 1852, he was unable to reestablish contact with the Babis there. Prime Minister Mirza Aqa Khan had brought Baha'u'llah back from Iraq for his own reasons. He wanted to show the shah that he had the "Babi problem" under control and had their leader under close surveillance.<sup>22</sup> On Baha'u'llah's arrival back in Tehran, Mirza Aqa Khan kept him for a month at the home of his brother in Tehran and then, when the summer arrived and it was the custom of the nobility to withdraw to the cooler hills north of Tehran, he had Baha'u'llah go to his (Mirza Aqa Khan's) estate at Afchih. And so during the critical three-month period before the attempt on the life of the shah, Baha'u'llah was kept isolated and unable to influence the Babis. Only once during this time, in June just as Baha'u'llah was transferring to Afchih, did 'Azim manage to meet with Baha'u'llah, and at this interview Baha'u'llah urgently tried to dissuade 'Azim from the course he was taking. According to Nabil:

I have heard it stated by Aqay-i-Kalim [Baha'u'llah's brother] that in the course of that journey [to Afchih] Baha'u'llah was able to meet 'Azim, who had been endeavoring for a long time to see him, and who in that interview was advised, in the most emphatic terms, to abandon the plan he had conceived. Baha'u'llah condemned his designs, dissociated himself entirely from the act it was his intention to commit, and warned him that such an attempt would precipitate fresh disasters of unprecedented magnitude.<sup>23</sup>

The meetings of the Babis in Tehran continued, usually at the house of Sulayman Khan but sometimes, during the hot summer months, in the villages to the north such as Darband and Dizāshūb, where Sulayman Khan had a summer residence. It is difficult to be sure of the number attending the meetings. It was probably around thirty men, although some late Iranian Muslim sources suggest it may have been as many as seventy.<sup>24</sup> In any case, it was a small fraction of the total number of Babis in the country and not even a majority of Babis of Tehran. (Baha'u'llah is recorded as earlier hosting a meeting attended by 150 Tehran Babis.<sup>25</sup>) Among those attending meetings in Sulayman Khan's house were a number of prominent Babis, such as Mirza Sulayman Quli Nuri, brother of the head footman (*shātir-bāshī*) of the shah; Mulla 'Abdu'l-Karim Qazvini, who had been the Bab's secretary (he had assumed the name Mirza Ahmad to conceal his identity from authorities); Haji Mirza Jani, a prominent merchant of Kashan; Lutf-'Ali Mirza Shirazi, a descendant of the former Afshar dynasty; and of course Mirza Sulayman Khan himself, whose father Yahya Khan Tabrizi was from an important clan of Tabriz and had been the shah's master of the horse (*mīr-ākhūr*).<sup>26</sup> Husayn Jan's charisma appears to have even drawn minor Qajar princes to the meetings, including Akbar Mirza and Muhammad Hashim Mirza, called Jināb. It appears Husayn Jan's speech was becoming more and more inflammatory, arousing his hearers to ever greater heights of emotion. We are fortunate to have a description of one of these meetings from Mirza Musa Aqa-yi Kalim, Baha'u'llah's brother, who, in an attempt to calm things down and change the direction being pursued, attended just two days before the attempt on the shah's life. He reported that when he arrived at the house of Sulayman Khan, the doorman did not recognize him (he was not a regular attendee) and sent him away. Those at the meeting heard of this and sent some of their number, including the above-mentioned Mirza Sulayman Quli, to Mirza Musa's home to apologize. Mirza Musa agreed to return and Muhammad Hashim Mirza, a Qajar prince who had been his guest, came along as well:

When we got permission to enter the meeting, we saw that Husayn [Jan Milani] was not the same Husayn of former days. His first words were an apology [about the previous turning away] to the effect that we had hardly realized you were here before you had gone away again. Then he said: "That which the Primal Point [the Bab] had forbidden, I have permitted." Akbar Mirza, the brother of Muhammad Hashim Mirza, was also there and was going along with them. Then a lengthy poem, which one of the people of Adharbayjan had composed in praise of Husayn in Persian, Turkish and Arabic, was read to the end in a joyful tone. Every time the name of Husayn was said, everyone prostrated themselves. I saw that some were looking at me angrily because I was not going along with them in their obsequiousness to Husayn. One of them seized the turban

of Jinab [Muhammad Hashim Mirza] and cast it onto the ground, saying: "How long will you remain behind the veil of names and customs?" I saw that this accusation was directed at me and so I asked Husayn: "The Bab has prohibited prostrating oneself [before a human being]; do you enjoin it?" This question put Husayn into deep thought, his head fell and he said nothing.

As I looked around the gathering, I saw that they were all immersed in desires and passions, except for three people, who were in a different state—they were disgusted at that worthless assembly and were like prisoners in thought of escape. One of them was Haji Sulayman Khan who was standing there distraught and, from time to time, an involuntary movement could be seen in his limbs and he would shift his position. Another was Mirza Ahmad [Mulla 'Abdul-Karim Qazvini, a secretary of the Bab] who, out of embarrassment, was standing in a corner. Another was Aqa Mirza 'Abd al-Wahhab Shirazi, who had followed Baha'u'llah from 'Iraq-i Arab [Baghdad] to Tehran—he was stuck there and they would not let him go out. When I saw those people were so emotional and tearful, I saw that it would not be right to remain at this meeting. Through a stratagem, I managed to extricate myself and the prince from there.

Once home, I sent my nephew, Mirza Baqir, with a message for Mirza Ahmad, saying that Baha'u'llah wanted to see him at Lavasan. After two hours, Mirza Baqir returned saying that Mirza Ahmad had put on his coat to leave but Husayn had said that if he were to leave the whole assembly would disperse and so they did not let him come. My intention was to bring him out and keep him so that he would be safe from this calamity, for I knew that they would all soon be arrested.<sup>27</sup>

It is clear from this report that control of the meetings at the house of Sulayman Khan had been taken from the other Babi leaders and now was totally dominated by Husayn Jan, who was using his oratory and crowd manipulation skills to excite his audience and exalt his own leadership. Most of his audience appear to have accepted his claim to a high station and were even prepared to break the laws of the Bab in prostrating themselves before him. Mirza Musa further recounted that even 'Azim, who had been one of the main instigators of the plot against the shah, had, in the last few days before the assassination attempt, become alarmed at the wild schemes being hatched by Husayn Jan. He had realized that the manner in which Husayn Jan was going about things was too unplanned and undisciplined to result in anything other than disaster for the Babis. On the last day before the assassination attempt, 'Azim tried to stop Husayn Jan, but the meeting turned against even him. Mirza Musa related:

Haji Mirza Hasan Khurasani . . . had come to Tehran from Khurasan, was residing in the Sar-Chishmih district and had no contact with anyone. Since he had had good reports of Baha'u'llah from Mirza Ahmad Azghandi, he had come to see him. At that time Baha'u'llah had just

returned to Tehran from 'Iraq. Haji Mirza Hasan was very happy following their meeting and remained in Tehran hoping for another meeting. One day he came saying that 'Azim had come to his house, in disguised attire, and was imploring an interview with me. I had no alternative but to go with the Sayyid and see 'Azim. He swore to me, saying: "There is no need to say anything about Husayn Milani. I only go there in the hope of bringing them to their senses or at least to try to disperse those who have gathered there from the surrounding areas." I said: "Your going there is not advisable and will not bring forth any fruit."

The next day, when the affair of the Shah had started and there was uproar afoot, Haji Mirza Hasan came to me again saying: "Azim adjures you in the name of the Bab to come and see him one more time." When he saw me, he began to weep, saying: "Last night, I went to the house of Husayn Milani. At first they would not let me in. When I was allowed in, they would not let me sit down and they mocked me and would not let me speak to the Khan [Mirza Sulayman Khan] or Mirza Ahmad. I spent the night at the mosque. The whole town is in uproar and it seems that Sadiq has done something wrong and no-one knows what has happened. Now we want to walk on our own feet to our place of death, because it is clear that they will capture every one of us and kill us with all kinds of torture." I said: "I and this nephew of mine, Mirza Baqir, are also ready." It was arranged that they would send me word and we would all go together to the place of self-sacrifice. I said: "Although I was never with you and, from the start, I did not consider your views correct, and even tried to prevent you from pursuing them, nevertheless I am ready for martyrdom."<sup>28</sup>

Thus even 'Azim, one of the most ardent extremists who wanted to mount a coup against the shah, had realized the hopelessness of what was being planned and had tried to stop it, but it appears that Husayn Jan had such a powerful hold on the meetings at the house of Sulayman Khan that 'Azim was unable to get a hearing there.

### **THE ATTEMPT ON THE LIFE OF NASIR AL-DIN SHAH**

Details of the attempted assassination of Nasir al-Din Shah appear to have been that Husayn Jan dispatched twelve Babis to Shimran, in the north of Tehran, where the shah was staying during the hot summer months, with instructions to look for an opportunity to assassinate him. At the same time, Azal set off for his home region of Nur in order to raise a simultaneous Babi revolt there. The actual attempt on the shah's life was made by three individuals who appear to have been very ill-prepared for their task, having only pistols loaded with grape-shot unlikely to kill anyone. This fact strengthens the impression that the final orders for the attempt were made by the fiery and magnetic Husayn Jan, who was almost certainly illiterate and would have had no knowledge of firearms, rather than the educated and clever Shaykh 'Ali 'Azim.

On 15 August 1852, the three Babis approached the shah, as though presenting a petition, as he was setting off to hunt; most of his retinue lagged behind since protocol demanded they wait until the shah mounted before themselves mounting. Then the three Babis, one at a time, drew their pistols and discharged them. Finding they had failed—one of the shots lodged a few pellets under the skin of the shah's shoulder—they dragged him off his horse and tried to attack him with daggers. By this time the shah's retinue had sprung into action: they cut down one assassin and arrested the other two, subjecting them to torture to extract information.<sup>29</sup> The shah's men learned the would-be assassins were Babis and had their fellow-conspirators in Shimran arrested. Then a raid was launched against the house of Sulayman Khan, and he and some twelve others were arrested. Shaykh 'Ali Azim was, as we have seen from the above account, not at the house of Sulayman Khan but was captured. A servant of Sulayman Khan was made to go about the streets of the town, and whenever he identified those who had been present at the meetings he pointed them out to the guards and they were arrested. The shah then gave orders for a general policy of arresting and putting to death all Babis throughout the country.

In Tehran for the rest of the month of August, there was a steady stream of executions. Each Babi was given to a government department, dignitary of state or guild of the city bazaar, and these would vie to find more gruesome ways of torturing and killing their assigned Babi. In this way, Babis were beaten, stabbed, blinded, shod like horses, or had burning candles inserted into holes in their flesh, before being dispatched in various ways.<sup>30</sup>

The Prime Minister was alarmed, knowing at his estate at Afchih was a leading Babi, Baha'u'llah, whom the shah's mother had singled out as her prime suspect in the assassination plot. The Prime Minister sent his brother to Afchih to ask Baha'u'llah to go into hiding, but the latter set out towards Shimran where the shah had his summer camp. On the way, Baha'u'llah stopped at Zargandih to visit his sister, who was living in the summer compound of the Russian legation (her husband Mirza Majid Ahi was Persian secretary of the legation). He was recognized as he went into the compound and the shah's government asked for him to be handed over, a request with which the Russian Minister Dolgoruki complied. Sulayman Khan's servant was brought to Baha'u'llah but failed to identify him (which is not surprising as Baha'u'llah had not taken part in the meetings at the house of Sulayman Khan). Therefore after five months in prison, Baha'u'llah was released and condemned to exile. Although offered refuge by the Russian minister in Russian territories, he chose to go to Baghdad where he eventually announced he was "He whom God shall make manifest" promised by the Bab and founded the Baha'i faith. One of his first acts after making this claim was

to abolish the institution of holy war, and he later stressed obedience to government as one of his key commands to followers.

It has already been noted that the number of Babis in Tehran had been swollen by the arrival of Babis fleeing persecution and massacre at Shaykh Tabarsi, Nayriz and Zanjan in 1848–1850. In looking at the list of those known to have been rounded up and executed in Tehran, one is struck by the fact that several were survivors of these previous episodes, who had seen family and friends tortured and killed. One of the three would-be assassins was Mirza Qasim Nayrizi, who had been captured and imprisoned during the Nayriz episode. He had been thrown into an icy pool in winter and then pulled out and beaten with sticks until he signed over his wealth to the governor of Nayriz.<sup>31</sup> Another of the group of Babis who went to Shimran for the attack on the shah was Mirza Muhammad Nayrizi, who had been wounded but fled the Nayriz massacre of Babis in 1850. While he was away from Nayriz recovering from his wounds, his blind 12-year-old brother had been tortured to death and his parents had been dispossessed of their wealth. When he learned of his, it is said that “a fire lit up within him and, unable to control himself, he left behind his friends and family and set off to wreak revenge on Nasir al-Din Shah and to pull down this edifice of tyranny.”<sup>32</sup> Another of the group of Babis who went to Shimran was Lutf-‘Ali Mirza Shirazi, a survivor of the Shaykh Tabarsi episode. Also among those arrested and executed were two from Zanjan and another survivor of Shaykh Tabarsi. Thus at least six of those plotting at the house of Sulayman Khan were survivors of previous massacres of Babis, and would have had thoughts of revenge for their family and friends killed in those upheavals.<sup>33</sup>

### SUMMARY OF EVENTS

Following the severe persecutions of the Babis in 1848–1850 and the execution of the Bab in 1850, the Babi movement was left shattered and with no clear leadership. In Tehran, two differing groups appeared among the Babis of the city. One group, under the leadership of ‘Azim and Azal, wanted to go to war with the Iranian government, partly to fulfill their apocalyptic and millennialist vision and partly out of revenge for persecutions they had suffered. The other, under the leadership of Baha’u’llah, looked to rebuild relationships with the government and advance the Babi cause by persuasion and the example of virtuous living. Gary Waite has compared this development of two pathways to a similar development among the Anabaptists of Münster and The Netherlands.<sup>34</sup> In Nichiren Buddhism, the nationalistic millennialism that sustained Japan’s militarism before World War II was transformed after Japan’s defeat into a pacifist organization such as Soka Gakkai.<sup>35</sup> Ian Reader has discussed a group’s adoption of new tactics after it has been prevented from carrying out its original objectives as “the pragmatics of

failure.<sup>36</sup> In the case of the Babis and the Anabaptists, however, the development of a peaceful strand could as well be seen as the reemergence of original characteristics of the movement prior to distortion caused by persecution.

The militant group of Babis was between thirty and seventy persons, only a small number of the total Babi population of perhaps 100,000. Their meetings appear to have come under the control of Husayn Jan, an emotive and magnetic figure who obtained a high degree of personal devotion to himself from the group. As a result the more able 'Azim was pushed out of the picture, and this may be why the final planning of the attempt on the shah's life appears to have been rather incompetent.

### FACTORS LEADING TO VIOLENCE

The Babis were undoubtedly a religious group for which millennialism played a major role. It is important to note that although such religious groups are frequently decried in the modern press and referred to in a derogatory manner as "cults," they are in fact, as Grant Underwood has noted, neither socially marginal nor psychologically maladjusted.<sup>37</sup> Many of the Babis came from the most respected and influential echelons of Iranian society—clerics, government officials, merchants, craftsmen and skilled artisans.<sup>38</sup> Although most millennialist groups have teachings describing violent scenes of death and destruction at the end of the world, this does not make them inherently violent: these events are usually described as being the result of divine actions and not something believers are expected to initiate or participate in. Indeed, most millennialist groups, whether of the progressive or catastrophic kind, are peaceful. Catherine Wessinger has described three pathways,<sup>39</sup> not mutually exclusive, whereby some millennialist groups can move towards violence:

(a) *Assaulted millennialist groups.* These groups are perceived by outsiders to be dangerous and therefore resort to violence in self-defense. Such groups include the Branch Davidians near Waco, Texas, and nineteenth-century Mormons in Missouri and Utah. We can describe the Babis in the period of 1848 to 1850 as an assaulted millennialist movement. Their intentions were misunderstood and feared. Although they may on occasion have been somewhat provocative, most of the aggression came from the state and the Babis took what were for the most part defensive measures.

(b) *Fragile millennialist groups.* These initiate violence to preserve their religious goal. The growing realization they will not achieve their millennialist goal by peaceful persuasion, along with growing pressure upon them (from internal factors such as dissent and defection, and external forces such as government, media and ex-members) lead to an unstable situation. Their leaders (often perceiving their hold over the

movement to be slipping) come to consider that the importance of their millennial goal justifies using violent means. The violence can be directed towards members considered to have betrayed the group or towards outsiders who have attacked the group. Such groups include the Solar Temple, Aum Shinrikyô, and Heaven's Gate.

By the time we come to the 1852 episode that is the subject of this article, the Babis were looking much more like a fragile millennialist movement in that their leadership had been destroyed and they were riven with factions and dissent. The attempt on the life of the shah was, in effect, a last desperate attempt by a small faction of Babis trying to hold on to their ultimate concern, their vision of what should have happened with the coming of the Twelfth Imam—military victory over their enemies—a vision from which many Babis had turned. This vision included what Wessinger has termed a radical dualism, a rigid and stark division of the world between good and evil.<sup>40</sup> This small group of Babis saw their enemies as identified with the evil forces that had persecuted Shi'i holy figures in the past, and themselves as the believers and supporters of the truth. In such a context, it was easy to start thinking that the movement's goals justified extreme means, that the assassination of the shah could be justified both by his evil nature and by furthering the goal of achieving a just society, the Babi state.<sup>41</sup>

(c) *Revolutionary millennialist groups.* These possess ideologies or ideologies that legitimate violence in order to be freed from persecutors and to set up their righteous government and society. An example is the Montana Freeman, but there are also non-religious Western social movements that can be seen to have derived their concepts and driving-force from Christian ideas of the millennium: Jacobins of the French Revolution (seeking to achieve the perfect society);<sup>42</sup> German Nazis (here seen as a millennialist movement seeking to set up the utopia of the Third Reich);<sup>43</sup> and the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia (and indeed most Communist revolutions).<sup>44</sup>

The Babis were accused by the shah's government of being a revolutionary group and at least one author, Denis MacEoin, has tried to analyze the upheavals in terms of the Babi doctrine of jihad (holy war).<sup>45</sup> This analysis fails, however. Although the doctrine of jihad is present in the Bab's earliest writings (he even tells his followers to be prepared to engage in it), he makes it conditional upon his calling for it, which he does not do. In later writings, the Bab turns away from the concept of jihad altogether and calls for his followers to guide souls to the truth with love and gentleness.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, while some of the Babis may have seen their actions at Shaykh Tabarsi, Nayriz and Zanzan as jihad, there is no evidence that the leaders of these episodes did so. While some actions of the Babis were provocative, they usually did not initiate violence, and these upheavals became battles when local clerics and government forces attacked them.

We may analyze the factors that led to violence in this small group of Tehran Babis as follows:

1. *Persecution.* It is undoubtedly the case that in many religious groups that have turned to violence, persecution (or a perception of being persecuted) has played a role. In the case of the Anabaptists, for example, it was the persecutions to which they were subjected after the Peasants' War that caused some of them to turn to violence.<sup>47</sup> In the case of Aum Shinrikyô in Japan, the perception of being persecuted, along with the fact that judicial and government forces had been investigating the group and were about to act against it, led to the release of sarin gas in Matsumoto in 1994 (with the aim of killing three judges about to give a judgment against the group) and on the Tokyo subway in 1995 (to immobilize police about to raid the group's commune).<sup>48</sup> In the case of the Branch Davidians near Waco, it was the persecution and eventual attack by government forces that led to deaths in the group.<sup>49</sup>

In the case of the Babis, they had suffered an intense three-year period of persecution and, as noted above, several of those who took part in the plot to assassinate the shah had experienced torture, dispossession and the killing of family and friends.

2. *Conceptual Factors.* Some scholars have emphasized the manner in which doctrines and teachings of the group leader can prepare followers for violence. In particular, a belief in radical dualism—the division of the world into good and evil—can lead to a belief that a prerequisite for the arrival of the millennium is that whatever is necessary be done to eliminate evil.<sup>50</sup> The concept of the dominion of saints, which appears to have first emerged among the Taborite wing of the Hussites of Bohemia, held that, just as Adam and Eve had dominion over the earth before they fell from grace, all authority and property belonged by right to those in a state of grace, meaning those who followed the movement. Some held it was permissible to assert this right to authority and property over those unbelievers, and in particular those who held power and wealth, by force.<sup>51</sup> Asahara Shôkô, leader of Aum Shinrikyô, developed the Buddhist concept of *poa* into a teaching that the guru could order the death of someone if their continued life would have negative karmic effects.<sup>52</sup>

As mentioned above, no specific factors in the teachings of the Bab were predisposed to violence. In his writings, he did not advocate violence and even took steps to try to prevent it. Conceptual elements were, however, of importance. The success of the Bab lay not in his ability to break with the past but to rework the powerful motifs that had gripped and inspired his culture.<sup>53</sup> While the Bab may have sought to impose an other-worldly spiritual interpretation upon the end-of-the-world expectations that he aroused, some of his followers could not see beyond the literal, violent apocalypse they had been brought up to expect. The more those events brought out similarities between the

Bab and Babis on the one hand and the martyred Imam Husayn and his companions on the other, the more some Babis saw the world in radical dualist terms. Moreover, the Bab's claim to be the return of the Twelfth Imam played to a repertoire of Shi'i expectations about the Twelfth Imam—he was expected to lead an army to victory over the enemies of the Shi'is. The more that people saw events as fulfilling expectations about the advent of the Twelfth Imam, the greater the expectation that apocalyptic battles would accompany this advent. It should not be forgotten moreover that many opponents of the Babis also saw the world in dualist terms. For them, the Babis were dangerous heretics, intent on wiping out Islam.

3. *Charismatic Leadership*. Several accounts of millennialist groups that have turned to violence have emphasized the importance of the role of a charismatic leader. Wessinger, following Weber, has described charismatic leaders as those whose followers “believe they have access to a divine or superhuman source of authority.”<sup>54</sup> Under certain conditions, this charisma can overcome followers' doubts, make the impossible seem possible, and induce people to do things they would normally not do. Michael Barkun has pointed to charismatic leadership as a characteristic feature of millennialist movements,<sup>55</sup> and Lorne Dawson has analyzed the social and psychological dynamics of several such movements that have moved towards violence partly on account of the high level of devotion to a leader believed to possess charismatic authority (for example, Jim Jones of the Peoples Temple and Asahara of Aum Shinrikyô).<sup>56</sup> Scholars have pointed out the similarities between millennialist movements and political movements such as Nazism in Germany and Maoism in China.<sup>57</sup> In these cases also, a leader possessing charismatic authority has had an important role in the move towards violence (although here, of course, the leader is thought by most of his followers to have superhuman qualities, rather than access to the divine).

In the Babi movement, the leadership was of great importance in the movement towards violence—not only in the assumption of leadership by Husayn Jan, believed to have charismatic authority (by virtue of being the Return of the Imam Husayn) and prepared to justify violence and indeed to manipulate the emotions of the group to achieve it, but also in the removal of leaders, such as the Bab and Baha'u'llah, who might have prevented the move towards violence. Undoubtedly the Babis had experienced great trauma in the preceding years and had a psychological need for a leader who could make sense of what had happened, set a guiding vision, and reassure the Babis that their movement was again under divine guidance and their sacrifices had not been in vain. We cannot know for certain, however, what precise factors attracted the following that Husayn Jan gathered around himself. One would think that intelligent men, of whom there were a number among the Tehran

Babis, would have realized that, even if the assassination of the shah had been successful, there was little chance of being able to overthrow the established order and set up a Babi state. There were simply too few Babis and insufficient popular support for the movement. To create a state of collective delusion that their violent action would initiate the intervention of supernatural forces to bring about their victory required a high degree of faith in the charismatic power of the leader and his ability to tap sources of unseen, divine power. This is what Husayn Jan was able to provide, persuading them to launch this hopeless and futile action. In line with Dawson's observations,<sup>58</sup> however, it would be a mistake to attribute to charismatic leadership too much responsibility for this episode. Without the other factors described above, it is unlikely that Husayn Jan could have led his Babi group to violence or even reached the leadership position he attained.

4. *Social and Economic Dislocations.* More generally, Norman Cohn has described how social and economic dislocations accompanying the break-up of traditional structures of Europe during the Middle Ages were important to the milieu out of which militant millennialism emerged.<sup>59</sup> In particular, the poor who accompanied the First Crusade were victims of severe famine and plague, making them easy targets for populist preachers who urged them to join the Crusade and reach the paradise of Jerusalem, where they would live in ease and wealth.<sup>60</sup>

Iran, in the period we are examining, was likewise in a period of rapid social and economic change and dislocation. Traditional society was being assailed by the economic superiority of the West, leading to social dislocation as workers in traditional industries could not compete with European goods.<sup>61</sup> While it cannot be ruled out that these factors were of some importance, a careful analysis of those who took part in Babi upheavals does not show a preponderance of people most affected by these changes,<sup>62</sup> and thus one must treat this aspect with some care.

A number of other factors are mentioned by some scholars but appear to have played either no role or an insignificant one in the Babi movement. These include:

(a) an unraveling of the authority and prestige of the leader (often due to deceptions being discovered). With Aum Shinrikyô<sup>63</sup> and the Solar Temple group,<sup>64</sup> this was a significant factor in the move towards violence. Among the Babis, although much of the leadership was killed in the persecutions, there was no loss of belief in the leaders.

(b) a belief in the leader's magical ability to defeat enemies and render followers invulnerable. This occurred in the Taiping army in China<sup>65</sup> and among the Native American ghost dancers in the United States.<sup>66</sup> Although the Bab gave instructions for the creation of amulets, there is little indication these were used as protection in battle. Some stories circulated among government forces that the Nayriz Babis had

some magical pomegranate syrup, which if drunk made one a Babi convert,<sup>67</sup> but this was almost certainly an attempt to explain the attraction the Babi movement held for so many people, and in any case it did not relate to the fighting. However, as indicated above, it is not impossible that Husayn Jan persuaded his followers that their action would somehow magically initiate a chain of events leading to the prophesied victory over the forces of evil.

## CONCLUSION

The attempt on the life of the shah of Iran in 1852 by a small radicalized faction of the Babi community under the leadership of Husayn Jan was an event that provides some interesting insights into the dynamics leading a millennialist movement into violence. Among the factors in this event were a preexisting religious milieu that expected a millennial event associated with violence and engendered a radically dualist worldview that saw Nasir al-Din Shah's government as the embodiment of a mythical evil destined to be defeated and removed; severe persecution that led to the death of much of the leadership and the creation of a "fragile millennial group," which saw its millennialist goal slipping away and for which a dramatic violent action may well have appeared to be a way of unleashing divine intervention to set the movement back on the path to victory; a desire for revenge by some who had been personally affected by the persecution; the removal of the more moderate leadership (leaning toward progressive millennialism), leaving the more militant elements (leaning toward catastrophic millennialism) to lead the group towards violence; and a charismatic leader able to create a delusional atmosphere of certainty of victory, over-riding the realistic assessment of the hopelessness of the group's plans. Some of these factors have been noted in descriptions of other episodes of violence involving millennial groups, while some appear to have been specific to this episode.

The attempt on the shah's life has had repercussions lasting to the present day. Although, as demonstrated above, Baha'u'llah's policies were the exact opposite of those that produced the attempted assassination, the Baha'is were known as Babis by most Iranians until well into the twentieth century, and the atmosphere of hatred and fear created by the attempted assassination was transferred to them. This situation enabled the clerical and cultural enemies of the Baha'is in Iran in subsequent generations to persecute them, implicate them in unfounded conspiracy theories, and suppress any open and rational debate in Iran about them. This persecution has intensified since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and now parallels closely the pathways to genocide that have been described in other situations by various scholars.<sup>68</sup>

*I am grateful to J. Vahid Brown, William McCants, Khazeh Fananapazir, Sen McGlinn and Sepehr Manuchehri, who commented on this paper on a listserve; Catherine Wessinger and William Collins, who commented separately; and the anonymous reviewers of Nova Religio.*

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> On the number of Babis in Iran, see Peter Smith's summary of the evidence in "A Note on Babi and Baha'i Numbers in Iran," *Iranian Studies* 17, nos. 2–3 (1984): 295–301. My article uses the system of transliteration adopted by the *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*. Quotations from Baha'i publications use the Baha'i system of transliteration.

<sup>2</sup> Nikki Keddie, "Religion and Irreligion in early Iranian Nationalism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 4, no. 3 (1962): 265–95.

<sup>3</sup> On the Taiping rebellion, see Scott Lowe, "Western Millennial Ideology Goes East: The Taiping Revolution and Mao's Great Leap Forward," in *Millennialism, Persecution, and Violence: Historical Cases*, ed. Catherine Wessinger (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000), 220–32, esp. 226; Stephen Hunt, "The Revolutionary Dimension of Millenarianism: The Case of the T'aiiping Rebellion," in *Christian Millenarianism: From Early Church to Waco*, ed. Stephen Hunt (London: Hurst, 2001), 116–30.

<sup>4</sup> Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium* (London: Temple Smith, 1970), 13.

<sup>5</sup> On the Hidden Imam, see Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam: The History and Doctrines of Twelver Shi'ism* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1985), 161–71.

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Wessinger, "Millennialism With and Without the Mayhem," in *Millennialism, Messiahs and Mayhem*, ed. Thomas Robbins and Susan J. Palmer (London: Routledge, 1997), 47–59.

<sup>7</sup> See for example the summary of the *Persian Bayan* to be found in Moojan Momen, ed., *Selections from the Writings of E. G. Browne on the Babī and Baha'ī Religions* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1987); see in particular the chapters of Vahid 2, 325–38.

<sup>8</sup> On these opposing models, see Momen, *Introduction to Shi'i Islam*, 236; on the two opposing models available to Christians, see Reinaldo L. Román, "Christian Themes: Mainstream Traditions and Millenarian Violence," in *Millennialism and Violence*, ed. Michael Barkun (London: Cass, 1996), 51–82, esp. 56.

<sup>9</sup> For evidence of this identification see for example, Nabīl [Zarandī], *The Dawn-breakers: Nabīl's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahā'ī Revelation*, ed. and trans. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, Ill.: Bahā'ī Publishing Trust, 1962), 326, where not only is Karbala mentioned but also 72 companions, which is the number that the Imam Husayn is said to have had with him (343, 344, 413–14n. 2). This text is also available at <<http://reference.bahai.org/en/t/nz/DB/>>.

<sup>10</sup> [Zarandi], *The Dawn-breakers*, 413–14n. 2.

<sup>11</sup> See for example, [Zarandi], *The Dawn-breakers*, 495.

<sup>12</sup> [Zarandi], *The Dawn-breakers*, 463.

<sup>13</sup> See the account of this in I'tizād al-Saltanih, *Fitnih-yi Bāb*, ed. 'Abdu'l-Husayn Navā'ī, 2d ed. (Tehran: Babak, 1351/1972), 96–102.

<sup>14</sup> Fādil Māzandarānī, *Tārīkh Zuhūr al-Haqq*, vol. 4 (manuscript in private hands), 9–10.

<sup>15</sup> On disconfirmed prophecy, see Lorne L. Dawson, "When Prophecy Fails and Faith Persists: A Theoretical overview," *Nova Religio* 3, no. 1 (October 1999): 60–82.

<sup>16</sup> See for example a description of what happened at the conference of Badasht when this fact was first made clear in [Zarandi], *The Dawn-breakers*, 295–98. Also, most of the Babis of Maraghih abandoned the Bab after the Bab's abrogation of Islam became known. See Fādil Mazandarani, *Zuhur al-Haqq*, vol. 3 (Tehran: n.p., n.d.), 58.

<sup>17</sup> Mazandarani, *Zuhur al-Haqq*, 4: 17.

<sup>18</sup> [Zarandi], *The Dawn-breakers*, 591–92.

<sup>19</sup> Nabil cited in Mazandarani, *Zuhur al-Haqq*, 4: 23 unnumbered note.

<sup>20</sup> Mazandarani, *Zuhur al-Haqq*, 4: 17.

<sup>21</sup> Mazandarani, *Zuhur al-Haqq*, 4: 61.

<sup>22</sup> Mazandarani, *Zuhur al-Haqq*, 4: 60–61.

<sup>23</sup> [Zarandi], *The Dawn-breakers*, 599. Hajī Sulayman Khan also managed to meet twice with Baha'u'llah; see Mazandarani, *Zuhur al-Haqq*, 4: 60.

<sup>24</sup> This number is stated to have been given in the course of the interrogation of Babis arrested after the attempted assassination and is recorded in Muhammad Hasan Khurmūji, *Haqā'iq al-Akhhār Nāsiri* (cited in Mazandarani, *Zuhur al-Haqq*, 4: 65 unnumbered note; and Hasan Fasā'ī, *Fārs-nāmih Nāsiri* (Tehran: lithograph, 1314/1896) 1: 308.

<sup>25</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahā, *Muntakhabātī az Makātīb Hadrat-i 'Abdu'l-Bahā*, vol. 4 (Hofheim, Germany: Bahā'ī-Verlag, 2000), 15–16.

<sup>26</sup> Mazandarani, *Zuhur al-Haqq*, 4: 62.

<sup>27</sup> Recorded by Nabil Zarandi and quoted in Mazandarani, *Zuhur al-Haqq*, 4: 62–63 (translated by the author).

<sup>28</sup> Recorded by Nabil Zarandi and quoted in Mazandarani, *Zuhur al-Haqq*, 4: 63–64 (translated by the author).

<sup>29</sup> I have based this account on Iranian government sources such as the official newspaper, *Rūznāmih-yi Vaqā'iyih Ittifāqiyih*, (reprint Tehran: Kitābkhānih Millī Jumhūrī Islāmī Iran, 1373/1994) for 3 Dhu'l-Qad'ih 1268, 1–2.

<sup>30</sup> See account in *Rūznāmih-yi Vaqā'iyih Ittifāqiyih*, for 10 Dhu'l-Qad'ih 1268, 1–3, translated in Moojan Momen, *The Babi and Baha'i Religions, 1844–1944: Some Contemporary Western Accounts* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1981), 139–42. A graphic account by a European witness to these executions, Capt. von Gumoens, an Austrian military instructor, exists. See Momen, *Babi and Baha'i Religions*, 132–34.

<sup>31</sup> Muhammad 'Alī Malik-Khusravī, *Tārīkh Shuhadā Amr*, vol. 3 (Tehran: Mu'assisih Millī Matbū'āt Amrī, 130 B.E./1973), 254–56.

<sup>32</sup> Malik-Khusravī, *Tārīkh Shuhada Amr*, 3: 221–22.

<sup>33</sup> See list in Malik-Khusravi, *Tarikh Shuhada Amr*, 216–332. It should be noted that another of the three would-be assassins is called Sadiq Tabrizi, but one historian says that it may be that he was from Zanjan (Malik-Khusravi, *Tarikh Shuhadā Amr*, 216), which would make it two of the three assassins and seven persons in all.

<sup>34</sup> Gary Waite, “The Religious State: A Comparative Study of Sixteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Opposition—The Case of the Anabaptists and the Babis,” *Journal of Bahā’ī Studies*, 7, no. 1 (1995): 69–90; on the Anabaptists, see also Norman Cohn, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*, 252–80; Frederic Baumgartner, *Longing for the End: A History of Millennialism in Western Civilization* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1999), 85–95. One can also see this pattern in social movements that are secular equivalents of millennialist movements. Thus after the violence brought about by the Jacobins as they sought to impose their perfect society on post-revolutionary France, there emerged the peaceful strand of the Saint-Simonians. See Baumgartner, *Longing for the End*, 131–43.

<sup>35</sup> Jacqueline Stone, “Japanese Lotus Millennialism: From Militant Nationalism to Contemporary Peace Movements,” in Wessinger, *Millennialism, Persecution and Violence*, 261–80.

<sup>36</sup> Catherine Wessinger, “The Interacting Dynamics of Millennial Beliefs, Persecution, and Violence,” in Wessinger, *Millennialism, Persecution and Violence*, 35.

<sup>37</sup> Grant Underwood, “Millennialism, Persecution and Violence: The Mormons,” in Wessinger, *Millennialism, Persecution and Violence*, 43–61.

<sup>38</sup> See Moojan Momen, “The Social Basis of the Babi Upheavals (1848-53): A Preliminary Analysis,” *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 15, no. 2 (1983): 157–83.

<sup>39</sup> Wessinger, “Interacting Dynamics,” 3–4, 16–38. The rest of this book contains chapters describing various examples of these three types.

<sup>40</sup> Catherine Wessinger, *How the Millennium Comes Violently: From Jonestown to Heaven’s Gate* (New York: Seven Bridges, 2000), *passim* but see especially 17–21, 265, 271–73.

<sup>41</sup> Compare, for example, the situation at Jonestown just before the killings/suicides there in 1978. See Rebecca Moore, “‘American as Cherry Pie’: Peoples Temple and Violence in America,” 121–37; and also Ian Reader, “Imagined Persecution: Aum Shinrikyō, Millennialism and the Legitimation of Violence,” 158–82, in Wessinger, *Millennialism, Persecution and Violence*.

<sup>42</sup> Baumgartner, *Longing for the End*, 133–41.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Ellwood, “Nazism as a Millennialist Movement” in Wessinger, *Millennialism, Persecution and Violence*, 241–60.

<sup>44</sup> Richard C. Salter, “Time, Authority, and Ethics in the Khmer Rouge: Elements of the Millennial Vision in Year Zero,” in Wessinger, *Millennialism, Persecution and Violence*, 281–98.

<sup>45</sup> Denis MacEoin, “The Babi Concept of Holy War,” *Religion* 12, no. 2 (1982), 83–129. There was a reply to this paper: Muhammad Afnan and William Hatcher, “Western Islamic Scholarship and Baha’i Origins,” *Religion* 15, no. 1 (1985) 29–51. There was a consequent interchange between these authors that is not of relevance to this article. For a discussion of the issues raised, see

- Siyamak Zabihi-Moghaddam, "The Babi-State Conflict at Shaykh Tabarsi," *Iranian Studies* 35, nos. 1–3 (2002): 87–112, esp. 99–102.
- <sup>46</sup> See for example, *Bayan*, Vahid 2, chapter 16, in Momen, *Selections*, 336; the references to jihad in the Bab's later writings relate to actions of a putative future Babi king.
- <sup>47</sup> Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, 254.
- <sup>48</sup> Reader, "Imagined Persecution," 158–82; Wessinger, "Interacting Dynamics," 30.
- <sup>49</sup> Wessinger, "Interacting Dynamics," 19–22; Eugene Gallagher, "'Theology Is Life and Death': David Koresh on Violence, Persecution and the Millennium," in Wessinger, *Millennialism, Persecution and Violence*, 82–100.
- <sup>50</sup> Barkun, *Millennialism and Violence*, 5–6.
- <sup>51</sup> Baumgartner, *Longing for the End*, 76.
- <sup>52</sup> Reader, "Imagined Persecution," 173–75.
- <sup>53</sup> On the reworking of traditional motifs, see Reinaldo Roman, "Christian Themes: Mainstream Traditions and Millenarian Violence," in Barkun, *Millennialism and Violence*, 51–82.
- <sup>54</sup> Wessinger, "Interacting Dynamics," 12.
- <sup>55</sup> Michael Barkun, *Disaster and the Millennium* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1974), 18–19.
- <sup>56</sup> Lorne Dawson, "Crisis of Charismatic Legitimacy and Violent Behavior in New Religious Movements," in *Cults, Religion, and Violence*, ed. David G. Bromley and J. Gordon Melton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 80–101, esp. 81–83; and Lorne Dawson, "Psychopathologies and the Attribution of Charisma: A Critical Introduction to the Psychology of Charisma and the Explanation of Violence in New Religious Movements," *Nova Religio* 10, no. 2 (November 2006), 3–28.
- <sup>57</sup> See Robert Ellwood, "Nazism as a Millennialist Movement"; Lowe, "Western Millennial Ideology Goes East."
- <sup>58</sup> Dawson, "Psychopathologies and the Attribution of Charisma," 20–21.
- <sup>59</sup> Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, *passim* but esp. 53–60.
- <sup>60</sup> Cohn, *Pursuit of the Millennium*, 61–70; Baumgartner, *Longing for the End*, 59–61.
- <sup>61</sup> For a fuller analysis of these social factors as related to the Babi upheavals, see Momen, "Social Basis," 158–59.
- <sup>62</sup> Momen, "Social Basis," 176–78.
- <sup>63</sup> Reader, "Imagined Persecution."
- <sup>64</sup> Massimo Introvigne, "The Magic of Death: The Suicides of the Solar Temple," in Wessinger, *Millennialism, Persecution and Violence*, 138–57.
- <sup>65</sup> Lowe, "Western Millennial Ideology Goes East."
- <sup>66</sup> Micheline Pesantubbee, "From Vision to Violence: The Wounded Knee Massacre," in Wessinger, *Millennialism, Persecution and Violence*, 62–81.
- <sup>67</sup> Momen, *Babi and Baha'i Religions*, 111.
- <sup>68</sup> Moojan Momen, "The Babi and Baha'i Community of Iran: A Case of 'Suspended Genocide'?" *Journal of Genocide Research* 7, no. 2 (2005): 221–41; Friedrich W. Affolter, "The Specter of Ideological Genocide: The Bahā'is of

Iran,” *War Crimes, Genocide, and Crimes Against Humanity* 1, no. 1 (2005): 59-89. There is an extensive literature about the Baha’i persecutions in Iran, many items of which link the attempted assassination of the shah in 1852 to the present persecutions. The following are some examples: *A Faith Denied: The Persecution of the Bahā’īs of Iran* (New Haven, Conn.: Iran Human Rights Documentation Center, 2006) at <[http://www.iranhrdc.org/docs/english/pdfs/Reports/bahai\\_fullreport.pdf](http://www.iranhrdc.org/docs/english/pdfs/Reports/bahai_fullreport.pdf)>; Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi, “Anti-Baha’ism and Islamism in Iran,” 200–31, and H. E. Chehabi, “Anatomy of Prejudice: Reflections on Secular Anti-Baha’ism in Iran,” 184–99, in *The Baha’īs of Iran: Socio-historical Studies*, ed. Dominic P. Brookshaw and Seena Fazel (London: Routledge, 2008).