

Hajji Sulayman Khan Tabrizi: a devout follower of the Bab with Qajar court connections

What follows is a brief account of one the heroes in the Babi history who followed the Bab earnestly and finally sacrificed his life in His path (extracted and modified from “To dance like Solomon: imitation and martyrdom in a Qajar ghazal” by Dominic Parviz Brookshaw).

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Hajji Sulayman Khan Tabrizi (d. 1852), the prominent Babi was the son of Yahya Khan, a nobleman of Tabriz and commander of the royal stewards of the Crown Prince, ‘Abbas Mirza (d. 1833), who subsequently served in a similar capacity under Muhammad Shah (r. 1834-1848). From an early age, Sulayman Khan showed no interest in government or court position, preferring to journey to Karbala where he frequented Sayyid Kazim Rashti’s lectures. Though he may have met the Bab in Mecca while on Hajj in 1844, Sulayman Khan is thought to have become a Babi later, possibly during a second journey to Iraq. Back in Tabriz, Sulayman Khan openly praised the Bab in verse and proclaimed the new religion. He was arrested and was to be taken to Tehran when his mother, Hajjiya Khanum, who was much respected by the local authorities, appealed to the governor and demanded her son be allowed to stay in Tabriz. After the Bab was transferred to the remote fortress at Chihriq in Azerbaijan in the spring of 1848, Sulayman Khan managed to disguise himself and enter the prison to enjoy an audience with the Bab. In early 1849, Sulayman Khan ventured to join his fellow Babis in their struggle at Shaykh Tabarsi but by the time he reached Tehran, the siege was over. Sulayman Khan remained in Tehran but refused government position and associated continually with other leading Babis, seeking out the few that had survived Shaykh Tabarsi.

In 1850, in collaboration with Baha’ullah, Sulayman Khan tried to reverse the death sentence imposed on the Bab. When Sulayman Khan learned that the Bab was due to be executed, Baha’ullah urged him to hurry to his hometown. Sulayman Khan arrived in Tabriz on 10th July 1850, the day after the Bab was martyred. Learning that the Bab’s remains had been deposited beside the moat beyond the city walls where they were under armed guard, Sulayman Khan approached the city’s mayor, Hajji Mirza Mihdi Baghmisha’i, for help. The mayor, a Sufi who was an old friend of Sulayman Khan, enlisted the assistance of a certain Hajji Allahyar Khan. A much-feared gang leader, Allahyar Khan intimidated the guards and facilitated Sulayman Khan’s retrieval of the Bab’s remains on the second night following his execution. Sulayman Khan took the remains to a silk factory owned by a Babi where he wrapped them in silk and placed them in a wooden casket. From Azerbaijan, under Baha’ullah’s instructions, Sulayman Khan transferred the wooden casket to Tehran where it was

hidden in various shrines and private homes in and around the capital for more than four decades before being transported to Palestine and ultimately buried on Mount Carmel in Haifa in 1909.

In 1850, Sulayman Khan's brother, Farrukh Khan, who was sent to Zanjan to crush the Babi uprising, was killed by followers of the town's leading Babi, Hujjat (interestingly, Sulayman Khan and Farrukh Khan's sister, Khan Qizi, was herself a committed Babi). The shah's chief minister, Mirza Taqi Khan Amir Kabir (1807-1852), though he knew of Sulayman Khan's Babi leanings, tolerated him, and by 1851, Sulayman Khan was hosting large gatherings of Babis in his residences in Central Tehran and nearby Dizashib. Traumatized by successive massacres of Babis at Shaykh Tabarsi, Nayriz, and Zanjan, and the execution of the Bab himself, Tehran's Babis gathered around various claimants to leadership. Many looked to Shaykh 'Ali 'Azim and to Husayn Jan Milani, who set about orchestrating the failed attempt on the life of Nasir al-Din Shah on 15 August 1852. Following this unsuccessful assassination attempt, Sulayman Khan's Tehran house was raided and he was arrested along with twelve other Babis suspected of involvement in the regicidal plot. In all around thirty of Tehran's leading Babis were soon put to death in frightful circumstances after being subjected to various judicial tortures. The majority of the mob lynchings and executions took place within a week of the attempt on the life of the shah (so between 16 and 22 August 1852). Though cleared of all wrongdoing, Sulayman Khan was executed in a cruel and gruesome manner that, as Amanat notes, earned him a special place in the chronicles of the Babi martyrs.

By 1850, the royal court concluded that the Babi movement constituted a dangerous revolutionary menace to the Qajar state that needed to be eradicated entirely. The Babi bloodbath that followed, Amanat says, "set new standards for cruelty and sadistic frenzy." Thus began the 'ulama's extensive and comprehensive persecution of the Babis that at times involved the enforced participation of the Iranian people in the extermination of the Bab's followers. The notorious Hajib al-Dawla (the chief court chamberlain, 'Ali Khan Maragha'i; d. 1867) had been instructed by the shah that, if assured of Sulayman Khan's innocence, he should persuade him to recant. If he did so, Sulayman Khan's life was to be spared. The Hajib al-Dawla found Sulayman Khan to be innocent but, since he refused to deny his faith in the Bab, the shah ordered he be put to death; the one concession being that Sulayman Khan could choose the manner of his execution. Zarandi's account of the tortures inflicted on Sulayman Khan and the gruesome details of his martyrdom is based largely on information provided to him by Baha'ullah's full brother, Mirza Musa Nuri.

Sulayman Khan was conducted southwards from the vicinity of the Gulistan Palace through the bazaar via the Darvaza-yi Naw (the southerly city gate built by Muhammad Shah also known as Darvaza-yi Muhammadiya), to an open area just beyond the walls that came to be called Maydan-i l'dam (Execution Square). The bazaar quarter, with its many mosques, shrines, and takyas (buildings used for mourning rituals during Muharram), was the center of socio-religious life in early Qajar Tehran and, in effect, an open air public performance space for the Muharram mourning processions (dastagardānī). Given the popularity of such events at all levels of Qajar society, the spectacle of Sulayman Khan's real-life martyrdom unfolding as he was paraded

through the streets may have appealed to Tehran's majority Shi'i population. Sulayman Khan was taken on a long procession around the alleyways of the bazaar from morning until nightfall. And since the capital's Azeri residents lived predominantly in the bazaar quarter, this meant that Sulayman Khan was marched to his death past throngs of his fellow Tabrizis.

Being led around the city streets formed the basis of *tashhīr*, punishment by exposure aimed at publicizing the accused's infamy with the goal of inciting ridicule.

In accordance with Sulayman Khan's wishes, burning candles were inserted into wounds made in his flesh in a barbaric torture method called *sham'-ājīn* (lit. stitched or sewn with candles). Once the lighted candles had been inserted into the cuts in his body, Sulayman Khan asked to be conducted through Tehran so that the populace might witness his torment (his motivation being that the intensity of his suffering may inspire them to recognize the validity of the Bab's claims). Though often used as a degrading torture method, *sham'-ājīn* was also one of the more violent self-mutilations (alongside *qama zadan* and *tīgh zadan* [self-laceration performed with a short blade, typically on the forehead and scalp]) performed by men as pious penance or as a way of fulfilling a vow (*nazr*). This self-reflexive aspect of the devotional form of *sham'-ājīn* potentially prompted Sulayman Khan to choose this specific form of torture for his own execution.

When the executioner hesitated to make the incisions, Sulayman Khan attempted to snatch the knife to cut into his own flesh. The executioner then ordered his men to tie the victim's hands behind his back and to cut a total of nine deep holes in Sulayman Khan's naked flesh: two in his chest, two in his shoulders, one in the nape of his neck, and four others in his back. In each wound, the guards inserted a burning candle and then processed him with much pomp and gaiety through the bazaar to the rhythm of music played by minstrels blowing long horns and beating large drums. Some accounts say this carnivalesque cavalcade was accompanied by dancers, and even by trained monkeys and bears (used to humiliate the victims and entertain the crowds).

Throughout his ordeal, Sulayman Khan displayed stoic fortitude. Followed on his march by a large crowd, Sulayman Khan was goaded by bystanders to dance. He is said to have been unperturbed by the screams of the curious male and female spectators who gathered in large numbers to watch the gory spectacle and hurl dust and ashes upon him. Active crowd participation was encouraged: spectators were prompted to insult and molest Sulayman Khan or to reward the executioners as a sign of their loyalty to the shah. Yet even the sight of his own blood gushing from his wounds did not diminish Sulayman Khan's courageous resolve. Interrupting this macabre parade, Sulayman Khan frequently paused to address the bystanders, to glorify the Bab, and to recite verses from the Qur'an. A poet of some talent, Sulayman Khan is said to have recited poetry during his torture, including

the following bayt adapted from the opening hemistich of a ghazal by Rumi:

باز آمدم باز آمدم از راه شیراز آمدم

با عشوه و ناز آمدم هذا جنون العاشق

I have returned, I have returned, I have come back by way of Shiraz.

I have come with coquetry and charm; such is the lover's insanity!

Here Sulayman Khan alludes to his beloved, the Bab, by modifying Rumi's *az pīsh-i ān yār* ("from the presence of that dear friend") to *az rāh-i Shīrāz* ("by way of Shiraz"), an allusion to the Bab's hometown and the birthplace of the Babi movement.

According to another account, Sulayman Khan, appearing to delight in seeing the candles flicker in his bleeding wounds, whenever one of the candles fell, would pick it up, light it from one of the still burning candles, and reposition it. The breeze blowing through the bazaar increased the intensity of the burning of the candles and, as they melted and their flames reached the level of the incisions, those nearby could hear the sizzling of Sulayman Khan's flesh. The wicks are said to have burned so deep that, "the fat flickered convulsively in the wound like a newly-extinguished lamp." No longer sensitive to the sting of the fire and indifferent to the pain to which he was subjected, Sulayman Khan, enveloped by the flames, "walked as a conqueror might have marched to the scene of his victory."

The executioner mocked Sulayman Khan and asked him why he does not dance when he finds death so pleasant. Having arrived at the open space beyond Darvaza-yi Naw, Sulayman Khan once again addressed the crowd, prostrated himself in the direction of Imamzada Hasan, murmured something in Arabic, and instructed the executioner to do his work. It was then that his long and painful death reached its climax when he was sawn into two halves. His scorched, blood-soaked remains, as per his request, were then suspended on either side of the city gate. **According to the Hungarian Persianist, Ármin Vámbéry (1832-1913)**, Sulayman Khan's bare feet were shod with horseshoes, and his teeth were all pulled out shortly before he was cleaved in two.

The cruelty, barbarity, and violence of the agonies inflicted on Babi victims prior to execution were noted by the British envoy to Iran, Sir Justin Sheil, in a dispatch dated 22 August 1852 in which he reports, "About ten persons have been executed, some with circumstances of great cruelty. Lighted candles have been stuck into the bodies of two or three, and after being allowed to linger, they have been halved with a hatchet while still alive ..."

Of Sulayman Khan's gory ordeal in the streets of south Tehran, Lady Sheil writes, "During these horrific tortures he is said to have preserved his fortitude to the last, and to have danced to the place of execution in defiance of his tormentors, and of the agony caused by the burning candles ..."

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persons on foot viewed as many as seven foxes at one time."

CRUELTY.—Hajee Suleiman Khan, accused as the instigator of an attack upon the life of the Shah of Persia, has been seized, his body carefully drilled with a knife in parts which would not at the moment cause death; pieces of lighted candles were then introduced into the holes, and, thus illuminated, carried in procession, and finally conveyed to the town gates, and there cleft in twain like a fat ram.

candles in Haji Suleman Khan, Babi - Babi-Baha'i history