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The Babi-State Conflict at Shaykh Tabarsi

Introduction

IN MAY 1844 A YOUNG MERCHANT FROM SHIRAZ, SAYYID ʿALI MUHAMMAD, made the claim that he was the *Bāb* (Gate). To his contemporaries the term referred to an intermediary between the community of believers and the messianic figure of Islamic eschatology, the Mahdi. By 1848 the religious movement that formed around him had attracted tens of thousands of adherents. The September of that year saw the beginning of the Shaykh Tabarsi episode in Mazandaran, which became the first of four major clashes between the Babis and the Qajar state.

The purpose of this article is to investigate the background, immediate circumstances, and events of the Shaykh Tabarsi conflict. It examines those developments, both in the political sphere and within the Babi community, that led to the outbreak of open warfare in 1848, and focuses on the question of the objectives of the Babi participants in the conflict. The Shaykh Tabarsi episode is often portrayed as the first of a series of unsuccessful attempts by the Babis to subvert the ruling dynasty. This is the view reflected in Western diplomatic reports and contemporary state chronicles, and has since been accepted by many scholars. In an influential study, MacEoin attempts to place the Shaykh Tabarsi and the later Babi-state conflicts in the context of a Babi concept of holy war.¹ His discussion, however, largely overlooks the implications of the development of this concept in the Bab's later writings. More significantly, a theoretical discussion of the Babi concept of holy war, or *jihād*, cannot by itself explain the objectives of the Babis involved. Rather, to find meaningful interpretations of the Babis' intentions, it is essential to analyze carefully what happened and how the Babi participants themselves understood their situation and their own actions. Such a study has been lacking in the case of the Shaykh Tabarsi episode, though there are relatively a large number of sources available on the conflict. This article is an attempt to provide such an analysis.

There are several Babi and Baha'i eyewitness accounts of the clash, which are generally more reliable than other sources available. They also reflect the Babi participants' perceptions of their circumstances and their

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1. Denis MacEoin, "The Babi Concept of Holy War," *Religion* 12 (1982): 93–129.

own actions, which are crucial for understanding the event. This paper draws in particular on these accounts. It also discusses briefly the concept of *jihād* in the Bab's later writings. The paper argues that when the Babis found themselves trapped in Mazandaran, they chose to fight a defensive holy war as a testimony to the truth of their cause. It was not their objective to mount an insurrection. Investigating the question of the objectives of the Babis at Shaykh Tabarsi also casts light on a broader and more essential issue: the nature of the Babi movement in the early years of its development.²

2. For the Babi movement in general, see Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: The Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844-1850* (Ithaca and London, 1989). With respect to the Mazandaran conflict, a good number of primary sources are available. The Babi-Baha'i sources include three eyewitness accounts, two narratives, as well as sections on the episode found in general histories of the Babi and Baha'i religions. Of the eyewitness accounts, Lutf 'Ali Mirza-yi Shirazi's untitled chronicle is the earliest and most extensive. (Cambridge, Browne Manuscripts, Or. F. 28, item 3. Also published online [<http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~bahai/arabic/vol5/lutfali/lutfali.htm>].)

The author was executed in 1852. His chronicle was therefore written within three years and three months of the conclusion of the Mazandaran episode. Mir Abu Talib-i Shahmirzadi's untitled narrative was written much later, but before 1888 (London, Afnan Library, uncatalogued photocopy of autograph manuscript). Haji Nasir-i Qazwini's eyewitness account is much shorter than the other two ("Tārīkh-i janāb-i Hāji Naṣīr-i shahīd," in 'Abd al-'Alī 'Ala'i, ed., *Tārīkh-i Samandar wa mulḥaqāt* [Tehran, 1974-75], 500-20.) He wrote his narrative not long before he died in prison in 1300/1882-83.

The *Waqā'i' i mimiyya* by Sayyid Muhammad Husayn-i Zawara'i Mahjur is an early account of the Shaykh Tabarsi conflict. (Cambridge, Browne Manuscripts, Or. F. 28, item 1. Published online at <http://www2.h-net.msu.edu/~bahai/arabic/vol5/mimiyyih/mimiyyih.htm>.) Mahjur seems to have written in 1278/1861-62.

The account by Aqa Sayyid Muhammad Riza Shahmirzadi also contains some information about the Mazandaran conflict (London, Afnan Library, uncatalogued photocopy of autograph manuscript). He was the youngest brother of Mir Abu Talib-i Shahmirzadi. His account seems to have been written, at least in part, in the 1890s.

Of the general histories of the Babi and Baha'i religions, the *Kitāb-i Nuqtatu'l-Kāf* is the earliest so far published, E. G. Browne, ed., *Kitāb-i Nuqtatu'l-Kāf* (Leiden and London, 1910). The *Tārīkh-i Jadīd* by Mirza Husayn-i Hamadani adds almost no new information on the Mazandaran conflict to what is available in the *Kitāb-i Nuqtatu'l-Kāf*; E. G. Browne, ed. and trans., *The Tārīkh-i Jadīd or New History of Mirzā 'Alī Muḥammad the Bāb* (Cambridge, 1893). Nabil-i Zarandi's narrative, completed in 1890, is much more extensive than the other two. The part dealing with Babi history has been published in an edited and abridged English translation under the title *The Dawn-Breakers: Nabil's Narrative of the Early Days of the Bahā'i Revelation*, trans. and ed. Shoghi Effendi (Wilmette, 1932).

The most important Muslim accounts of the clash are in the two main official histories of the period—Mirza Muhammad Taqi Lisan al-Mulk Sipīhr, *Nāsikh al-tawārīkh: tārikh-i Qājāriyya*, ed. Jamshid Kiyāfar (Tehran, 1998-99) and Riza Quli Khan Hidayat, *Rawzat al-ṣafā-yi Nāṣirī* 10 (Qum, 1960-61)—as well as the brief account by a certain Shaykh al-'Ajam, "Min kalām-i-Shaykh al-'Ajam-i Māzandarānī," in B. Dorn, "Nachträge zu dem Verzeichniss der von der Kaiserlichen öffentlichen Bibliothek erworbenen Chanykov'schen Handschriften und den da

The Shaykh Tabarsi episode constituted a turning point in the history of the Babi movement. It was the first time that the state, previously content with the incarceration of the Bab in a remote corner of the country, resolutely moved to suppress the Babis. Near the end of the conflict, some ten thousand troops and irregulars were engaged in fighting a few hundred Babis. The episode lasted eight months and left an estimated fifteen hundred dead, almost a third of whom were Babis. After this experience, the state acted more swiftly and forcefully against the Babis when new conflicts broke out in other parts of Iran. It was also during the conflict at Shaykh Tabarsi that half of the Letters of the Living, the core of the leadership of the movement, lost their lives. This was a severe blow, and it contributed to the almost entire collapse of the movement a few years later. The episode also played a part in the government's decision to execute the Bab. Decades later its memory was still fresh in the minds of the people of Mazandaran.

The Babi movement has often been interpreted in light of its later development into either Azali Babism or the Baha'î movement. Although they share the same historical origins, and many of the doctrines and tenets of the early Babi movement can be found in both of them, Azali Babism and the Baha'î faith constitute departures, in different directions, from the original Babi movement. Treating the Babi movement as identical with either one displaces it from its proper historical context.

The Development of the Babi Movement

The spread of the Babi movement in Iran and Iraq was swift and wide and provoked immediate opposition from the clergy. The Bab was banished to the far-off province of Azerbaijan, and some of his followers were maltreated. In October 1847 a young Shaykhi, probably assisted by two others, killed the powerful *mujtahid* of Qazvin, Mulla Muhammad Taqi-yi Baraghani, who was known for his anti-Shaykhi and anti-Babi propaganda. The assassination intensified the hostility of the clergy toward the Babis, several of whom were killed. This was the first instance of Babis being put to death in Iran. In April 1848 the Bab was brought to Tabriz, the provincial

mitgetheilten Nachrichten über die Baby und deren Koran, von B. Dorn," *Bulletin de l'Académie Impériale des Sciences de St-Petersbourg* 9 (1866): 202–31. The *Nāsikh al-tawārikh* and the *Rawzat al-ṣafā-yi Nāsirī* record the history down to the year 1274/1857–58. The account by Shaykh al-^cAjam was probably written in 1860.

A wide collection of contemporary diplomatic reports and accounts by Western travelers and missionaries is published in Moojan Momen's *The Bābī and Bahā'ī Religions, 1844-1944: Some Contemporary Western Accounts* (Oxford, 1981). A number of reports by the Russian Minister in Tehran and one by the Russian consul in Astarabad are available in "Excerpts from Dispatches written during 1848-1852 by Prince Dolgorukov, Russian minister to Persia," *World Order* 1 (1966): 17–24.

A document of singular importance is the edict of Nasir al-Din Shah to the governor of Mazandaran, a facsimile of which is published in *The Bahā'ī World*, 5 (1936): 58. Ruhū'llah Mehrabkhani gives an English translation of this edict in his *Mullā Ḥusayn: Disciple at Dawn* (Los Angeles, 1987), 249–51.

capital, to be interrogated in the presence of the crown prince and the clergy.³ On this occasion the Bab publicly declared himself to be the hidden Imam, the Mahdi, an open challenge to the clergy for which he was bastinadoed.

In late June 1848, a number of Babis gathered at Badasht, a small village in Khurasan, and here the movement effectively broke with Islam. Shortly afterwards, a group of Babis, under the leadership of Mulla Husayn-i Bushru'i, the Bab's most renowned disciple, set out from Khurasan toward Mazandaran, where they became involved in the conflict of Shaykh Tabarsi. In 1850, two other Babi-state clashes occurred, in which more than two thousand Babis lost their lives. In July of that same year the Bab was publicly executed. In August 1852, a group of Babis made an abortive attempt on the life of the shah. Simultaneously, Mirza Yahya Azal, regarded by many of the Babis as their new leader, tried to stage a revolt in Mazandaran, which also failed. In the aftermath of these attempts, the remaining Babi leadership was almost entirely wiped out. Azal's elder half-brother, Mirza Husayn 'Ali-yi Nuri Baha' Allah, who was among those imprisoned after the assassination attempt, was spared execution, but exiled to Iraq. In 1853, another Babi-state clash occurred, in which some two hundred and fifty Babis lost their lives. In about 1866, Baha' Allah openly claimed to be "He whom God shall make manifest" (*man yuzhiruhu allāh*), the messianic figure of the Babi religion. The majority of the Babis came to accept his claim. Baha' Allah enjoined his followers to abstain from violence, obey their governments, and shun political strife. In contrast, for some among the small band of Azal's supporters, religious concerns gave way to political activism, and several played prominent roles in the Constitutional Revolution of 1906–1911.

As a challenge to the legitimacy of the existing religious orthodoxy, and given the speed and scale of its growth, the Babi movement constitutes a unique phenomenon in recent Iranian history. The Babi-state clashes and the attempt on the life of the shah made a lasting impact on the monarch and the public at large. Nasir al-Din Shah remained alert to a perceived Babi threat, and throughout the Qajar period alleged Babi involvement provided a convenient means for countering calls for reform. During the Constitutional Revolution, the contending parties would use the accusation of Babi links to discredit and rally support against each other. The suppression of the Babi movement brought the *'ulamā'* temporarily closer to the state and strengthened their position vis-à-vis the Qajar shahs. The movement displayed some modern features, for instance, its attitude towards women. The direct influence of these features on the wider society, however, remained limited. These features were carried on and further developed in the Baha'i move-

3. Nabil, *Dawn-Breakers*, 301. According to Nabil, the trial of the Bab took place toward the end of July 1848. However, recently published evidence indicates that the trial occurred in the second half of April 1848. See letters from Aqa Sayyid Husayn-i Katib and Khal-i Asghar in Abu'l-Qasim Afnan, *'Ahd-i A'lā: Zindagānī-yi Haẓrat-i Bāb* (Oxford, 2000), 337–39.

ment. The Babi movement's revolutionary character was primarily owing to its radical break with the religious past.

The Babis, the State, and the 'Ulamā'

The writings of the Bab reflect his view of temporal power. The legitimacy of Muhammad Shah's rule, it is implied, is dependent on his accepting the Bab's claim. In the *Qayyūm al-Asmā'*, the earliest work written following the announcement of his claim, the Bab maintains that, as the representative of God, he is the source of sovereignty. He summons the shah to embrace his religion and instructs him to wage *jihād* in order to bring people into his faith. The Bab also addressed several letters to the shah and requested an audience with him, but to no avail. In his letters, the Bab warned the shah of the punishment that awaited him if he did not change his attitude toward the Bab, and at the same time disclaimed any material interests. Toward the end of Muhammad Shah's reign, the tone of the Bab's letters to him, and especially to his premier, Haji Mirza Aqasi, became more severe. It was the premier who had control over the affairs of the kingdom.

Haji Mirza Aqasi had apparently early on seen in the Bab a threat to his position. Muhammad Shah's mystical leanings tied him closely to Aqasi, who was his former tutor and acted as his spiritual guide. The Bab was a descendant of the Prophet and a charismatic figure who had proved his influence by winning over some of his potential clerical adversaries. Apparently due to such considerations, Aqasi persuaded the shah not to grant the Bab an interview, and instead to order his banishment to the fortress of Maku in Azerbaijan. As the Babi movement spread, and the opposition of the clergy mounted, the government complied to a greater extent with their wishes. Following the assassination of Baraghani, his heirs and other clerics forced the government to imprison several Babis, a few of whom, although apparently innocent, were subsequently killed. On this occasion the state failed to shield the Babis, though it did not voluntarily engage in persecuting them.

The clergy had an obvious interest in involving the authorities in the persecution of the Babis. In the period prior to the Mazandaran conflict, the clergy more than once had called on the authorities to suppress the Babi movement, which they regarded as a heresy that threatened the foundations of the religion. They also ascribed subversive intentions to the Babis. The Bab probably viewed a confrontation with the religious establishment as inevitable. It seems, however, that he did not consider an understanding with the state impossible, since he continued sending letters to the shah as late as 1848. Several times the Bab and his followers challenged the shah and the authorities to summon them and the '*ulamā'*' to a meeting where the "truth" could be established.

The Bab's claim to mahdihood, publicly announced during the interrogation in Tabriz, had significant repercussions for the movement, for it posed too serious a challenge to the clerical establishment to be ignored. After all, had "the Bāb in fact been acknowledged as the Hidden Imam, the function

of the ulama would have ceased to exist."⁴ Apart from this, the Bab did not fulfill the expectations of the 'ulamā' about the Mahdi's appearance. As for the state authorities, even though the Bab did not make any claims to the throne, his claim to mahdihood could be perceived as a challenge, since in the context of Shi'ī theology the promised Mahdi was the ultimate source of power, whether religious or secular. On this basis, it has been argued that the Babis' belief that the Bab was the Mahdi constituted "a permanent bar to any real coexistence of the Babis and the State," and that once the government understood the nature of the Babi movement, it "moved systematically and implacably to destroy it."⁵ It is difficult, however, to find evidence that could substantiate this view in the contemporary sources written up to and during the Mazandaran conflict. At the time, the state authorities did not take the Bab's claim to mahdihood seriously. The young crown prince, Nasir al-Din Mirza, in his report to Muhammad Shah about the interrogation, simply ridicules the claim voiced by the Bab during the proceedings.⁶ The campaign against the Babis at Shaykh Tabarsi was not directly linked to this claim. In general, there was much confusion in the early years among the authorities and the public about the exact nature of the Bab's claims and his and the Babis' objectives. It seems that the dominant view was that the Bab claimed charismatic religious authority in order to gain power. Clearly at the time of the Mazandaran conflict, which began just a few months after the interrogation of the Bab, the view that the Babis used religion as a cover for political ends had gained some currency among the authorities. Lt-Col. Farrant, the British chargé d'affaires, remarked about the motives of the Babis at Shaykh Tabarsi, "It is supposed their true object is not in any way relative to religion, but to create a revolutionary movement against the Government."⁷

Though the authorities failed to notice the implications of the Bab's claim to mahdihood, it nevertheless worsened an already tense situation. There had been sporadic cases of persecution of the Babis prior to April 1848. Such incidents seem to have occurred more frequently, as the clergy, infuriated by the open challenge of the Bab and encouraged by the punishment imposed on him, stepped up its attempts to incite the authorities and

4. Hamid Algar, *Religion and State in Iran, 1785-1906: The Role of the Ulama in the Qajar Period* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969), 148.

5. John Walbridge, "The Babi Uprising in Zanjan: Causes and Issues," *Iranian Studies* 29 (1996): 359.

6. A later report ascribed to Nizam al-^cUlama³, who led the interrogation, likewise does not indicate that anyone paid attention to the political implications inherent in the claim to mahdihood. For the text and translation of Nasir al-Din Mirza's report, see E. G. Browne, *Materials for the Study of the Bābī Religion* (Cambridge, 1918), 249–55. For the report ascribed to Nizam al-^cUlama³, see Hidayat, *Rawzat al-ṣafā-yi Nāṣiri*, 10: 423–28. See also Sipih, *Nāsikh al-tawārīkh*, 2: 909–13; E. G. Browne, ed. and trans., *A Traveller's Narrative Written to Illustrate the Episode of the Bāb* 2 vols. (Cambridge, 1891), 2: 277–90, note M.

7. Dispatch of January 30, 1849, cited in Momen, *Bābī and Bahā'ī Religions*, 92.

the populace to persecute the Babis. An early account by Dr. Austin Wright, an American missionary stationed near Chahriq, where the Bab was held in confinement, states that "fierce quarrels" had already taken place between the Babis and "the so-called orthodox party," when, following the bastinado inflicted on the Bab, the government issued orders that the Babis "should be arrested wherever they were found and punished with fines and beatings."⁸ The Bab's assumption of the role of an independent prophet through the advancement of claims to religious authority and the formulation of a new set of laws was hardly less revolutionary than his claim to mahdthood. His followers' resolve to announce his claim and to effect the annulment of Islamic law only increased tensions. The episode of Mashhad and the attack on the Babis after the conclave in Badasht should be viewed in this light.

In Mashhad, following a fight between a young Babi and a servant of one of the local religious leaders, the Babi involved was beaten and dragged through the streets by a string through his nose. About seventy Babis, armed with swords, attempted to rescue him, and in the clashes that occurred a few of the townspeople and Babis were injured.⁹ It was this episode that led to Mulla Husayn's expulsion from Mashhad, upon which he set out on his march to Mazandaran. In Badasht, Qurrat al-^cAyn Tahira, the only woman among the Letters of the Living, appeared unveiled in a gathering of Babis, signaling the abrogation of Islamic law, and the commencement of the *qiyāma* (resurrection). On hearing the news that the Babis had discarded the *sharī'c*a, and rumors of immoral acts committed, the inhabitants of Niyala, a village in Mazandaran, attacked the Babis who had arrived there from Badasht, killed and injured some, and plundered their belongings.¹⁰

It was shortly after these events that Muhammad Shah died, and with the accession of Nasir al-Din Mirza, power fell into the hands of the new premier, Mirza Taqī Khan, entitled Amir Kabir. This radically changed conditions for the Babis, as he gave high priority to exterminating them. Amir Kabir was a secularist reformer, determined to achieve his aims at any cost. He apparently regarded the Babi movement as religious in nature and not political, but saw it as a threat to public order. When Muhammad Shah finally succumbed to his illness, the country was already in a state of turmoil. Gross mismanagement in the later years of Aqasi's premiership had caused much discontent. The state treasury was almost empty and the government was on the verge of bankruptcy. After the shah's death, disorder broke out in many parts of the country, and the rebellion in Khurasan gained support. To stabilize the position of the new government and to proceed with his reform plans, Amir Kabir needed to restore order in the country. Such

8. Austin H. Wright, "Bāb und seine Secte in Persien," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 5 (1851): 384–85, cited in Momen, *Bābī and Bahā'ī Religions*, 73.

9. Mahjur, *Waqā'i'c-i mīmiyya*, 6–8. Mir Abu Talib, untitled narrative, 23, 46–47; ^cAla'i, ed., *Tārīkh-i Samandar*, 168; see also Nabil, *Dawn-Breakers*, 288–89.

10. Nabil, *Dawn-Breakers*, 298–300; Munireh Khanum, *Munirih Khānum: Memoirs and Letters*, trans. Sammireh Anwar Smith (Los Angeles, 1986), 15–16.

concerns seem to have motivated Amir Kabir's determination to crush the Babis. His alarm about the swift spread of the Babi movement is reflected in a contemporary report by Prince Dolgorukov, the Russian minister in Tehran. On March 7, 1849, at the height of the Mazandaran upheaval, Dolgorukov wrote,

However, no matter how serious this question may be [i.e. the success of Salar's rebellion in Khurasan], it has not preoccupied society to the same extent ever since the secretaries of the Bab have apparently had the tendency to grow in all parts of the Kingdom. The Amir confessed to me that their number can be already put at 100,000; that they have already appeared in southern provinces; that they are found in large numbers in Tihran itself; and that, finally, their presence in Adhirbayjan is beginning to worry him very much.¹¹

Commenting later on Amir Kabir's harsh policy toward the Babis, Ferrier, the French agent, wrote in a report dated July 25, 1850, "The Amīr had thought to strike the evil at its root in showing himself pitiless towards them; but the bloody executions that he ordered have not arrested the progress of the evil."¹²

The Qiyāma: A Babi Perspective

A discussion of the background of the Shaykh Tabarsi episode would not be complete without reference to the expectations of the Babis regarding the events associated with the Mahdi's appearance. Their views, like those of the populace, were shaped by Shi'ī traditions. According to the dominant view, the Mahdi, accompanied by an army, would wage a holy war against the forces of unbelief, restore justice in the world, and establish his rule. The Bab's claim to *bābiyya* (gatehood) was linked to the imminent advent of the Mahdi himself, which implied the beginning of the final *jihād*. The *Qayyūm al-Asmā'*³ contains many references to *qitāl* (battle), keeping the Babis alert to a coming struggle. According to the traditions, the Mahdi would begin his *khurūj* (insurrection, literally "coming out") from Mecca. When the Bab instructed his followers to go to the Shi'ī shrine cities in Iraq (the °Atabat), where he would meet them after his pilgrimage to Mecca, many thought that the *khurūj* was to begin there. As it happened, however, the Bab failed to appear at the °Atabat. The activities of his emissary to the °Atabat had created tensions in the area.¹³ With thousands of pilgrims in Karbala, it was likely that the appearance of a large number of Babis would have resulted in

11. "Excerpts from Dispatches," 19.

12. Momen, *Bābī and Bahā'ī Religions*, 71.

13. Moojan Momen, "The Trial of Mullā °Alī Baṣṭāmī: a Combined Sunnī-Shi'ī Fatwā against the Bāb," *Iran* 20 (1982): 116–18.

a confrontation with the local population and the pilgrims. The Bab later said that it was because of the disbelief of the ‘*ulamā*’ and to avoid “strife” that he changed his plans and did not appear at the ‘*Atabat*.¹⁴ After this sudden change of plans, termed *badā*’ (change in the divine will), the expected struggle appeared to have been postponed to an unspecified future. The Bab also referred to *qitāl* occasionally in his later writings, and there is evidence of Babi armament in Khurasan and Qazvin, apparently in preparation for the expected battle. It is even reported that the Bab had alluded to the Shaykh Tabarsi episode one or two months before it began.¹⁵

Certain factors created uncertainty in the Babis’ expectations about future events. Apart from the possibility of *badā*’, allegorical reading of the eschatological traditions left room for different interpretations. There are also many contradictory traditions. Rather than depicting the Mahdi’s victory over his enemies, some traditions refer to his martyrdom and the humiliation and martyrdom of his companions.¹⁶ The Bab and his followers were aware of these traditions, and in their writings referred to them.¹⁷ The Bab had hinted at his own martyrdom in some of his writings and in conversation with his followers. According to some sources, he had anticipated Mulla Husayn-i Bushru’i’s martyrdom and had informed him of it. Haji Mulla Muhammad ‘*Ali-yi Barfurushi*, later called Quddus, the Bab’s foremost disciple, is likewise reported to have predicted Mulla Husayn’s martyrdom a few years before the Mazandaran episode.¹⁸ Probably only a few understood their hints at the time. Yet these reports indicate that the Babi leadership anticipated trials ahead.

As the confinement of their leader continued, and tensions surrounding them grew, the Babis were increasingly compelled to revise their views about a decisive victory followed by the reign of the Mahdi. The Bab and the Babi leaders addressed such issues in their writings. In his *Dalā’il-i sab‘a*, written in 1847, the Bab rejects the idea that the *faraj* (deliverance) of the Mahdi implies sovereignty, an army, and a kingdom.¹⁹ Likewise, the Bab’s amanuensis, Aqa Sayyid Husayn-i Katib, in a letter to one of the Bab’s uncles, comments on the common understanding of the *faraj*. He states that its true meaning is the revelation of verses (*nuzūl-i āyāt*), and not “the ascension on the throne of sovereignty (*salṭana*) or other vain imagin-

14. Letter in Afnan, ‘*Ahd-i A’lā*, 184.

15. Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*, 279; Asad Allah Fazil-i Mazandarani, *Kitāb-i zuhūr al-ḥaqq* (Tehran, n.d.), 3: 374; Browne, ed., *Nuqtatu’l-Kāf*, 139; ‘Abd al-Husayn Awarah, *al-Kawākib al-durriyya* (Cairo, 1923), 1: 133.

16. Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*, 196.

17. See Bab, *Dalā’il-i sab‘a* (n.p., n.d.), 47-48, and the treatise by Ibn-i Karbala’i, in Fazil-i Mazandarani, *Zuhūr al-ḥaqq*, 3: 514, both written in 1263/1846-47, about a year before the Shaykh Tabarsi conflict.

18. Browne, ed., *Nuqtatu’l-Kāf*, 139; Nabil, *Dawn-Breakers*, 262; Lutf ‘*Ali Mirza*, untitled chronicle, 118.

19. Bab, *Dalā’il-i sab‘a*, 33. See also the Bab’s letter to the ‘*ulamā*’ of Tabriz, cited in Afnan, ‘*Ahd-i A’lā*, 334.

ings current among people.”²⁰ It is quite plausible that by the time the Mazandaran episode began, the belief among the generality of the Babis that the Mahdi would establish his temporal rule through the power of his sword had been shaken.

An Outline of the Conflict at Shaykh Tabarsi

The Shaykh Tabarsi episode lasted from September 1848 to May 1849. The prelude to the conflict was the march of a group of Babis led by Mulla Husayn-i Bushru[’]i from Khurasan to Mazandaran (July– September 1848). Initially, the band numbered about two hundred, some of whom were armed. On Shawwal 12, 1264/September 11, 1848, the party reached Barfurush, the chief commercial town in Mazandaran.²¹ Muhammad Shah had died just shortly before that (September 4). On their arrival, the Babis were met by a mob of three to four thousand townspeople and villagers who refused to let them enter the town. Mulla Husayn instructed the Babis to turn back, but meanwhile the mob shot and killed two of them. He and a few others counterattacked and routed the mob. In the meantime, the Babis who arrived later took lodging in the caravansary of the town. They were exhausted from the long trip, during which several had fallen ill and one had died. In the following days, hundreds of people from nearby villages joined the mob and several times attacked the Babis. The attacks stopped with the arrival of ‘Abbas Quli Khan-i Larijani, a prominent Mazandarani chief (*sarkardah*), and it was agreed that the Babis should leave the area.

When the Babis left Barfurush, a crowd of townspeople followed them, and Khusraw-i Qadi-Kala[’]i, a tribal brigand, forcibly joined the Babis with his armed men, ostensibly to protect them. Khusraw, whose intent was actually to loot the Babis, led them around the countryside, while his men and other local people began secretly killing them off. When the Babis discovered this, they killed Khusraw, drove off his men, and took refuge in the nearby shrine of Shaykh Tabarsi (Shawwal 22, 1264/September 21, 1848).²² The shrine consisted of a building housing the shaykh’s tomb and a grassy enclosure surrounded by a wall two meters high. Browne, who visited Shaykh Tabarsi years later, wrote that it was “a place of little natural strength.”²³ The site was not chosen for strategic reasons. As the Babis expected to be attacked, they built four small towers around the shrine, from which they kept watch over the area. Quddus and others joined the Babis, and their number rose to about five hundred.

20. Afnan, *‘Ahd-i A‘lā*, 320. This letter was apparently written some time after Muhammad Shah’s death.

21. Lutf ‘Ali Mirza, untitled chronicle, 24. In this paper, the observation-based lunar calendar current in Iran, instead of the regulated, fixed Islamic calendar, has been used to determine the corresponding dates in the Gregorian calendar.

22. Lutf ‘Ali Mirza, untitled chronicle, 52-53.

23. E. G. Browne, *A Year Amongst the Persians* (London, 1893), 617.

When Nasir al-Din Shah heard that the Babis were entrenched at Shaykh Tabarsi, he gave orders to the chiefs of Mazandaran to wipe them out.²⁴ A number of local chiefs soon arrived with a militia nearly four thousand strong. On Muharram 25/December 22, the Babis made a sortie in daylight, surprised and routed their enemies, and killed seventy or more, including the commander of the army. They also captured a huge amount of ammunition, provisions, and about a hundred horses.²⁵ This was of great importance to the Babis, as their own equipment was completely inadequate. On their arrival at Shaykh Tabarsi, the Babis had probably many swords and daggers, but only seven muskets, and perhaps five horses.²⁶

After this defeat, the shah gave emphatic orders to his uncle, Prince Mahdi Quli Mirza, the newly appointed governor of Mazandaran, to eradicate the Babis. His edict, dated Safar 3, 1265/December 30, 1848, referred to the Babi movement as a "fresh heresy" (*bid'ā*), the extermination of which was required by the religion and Shi'i doctrine. A note in the shah's own handwriting read: "It is true. . . you must exert yourself to the utmost in this affair. This is not a trifling amusement. The fate of our religion and of Shi'i doctrine hangs in the balance."²⁷ The edict reveals a significant measure of religious motivation on the part of the young shah for the suppression of the Babis.

Sometime during the first half of January 1849, the prince-governor arrived at a village near Shaykh Tabarsi. He did not launch an attack immediately, as he was waiting for reinforcements. The Babis had started digging a ditch around the shrine on Safar 1, 1265/December 28, 1848 and were building a fort. They also began storing provisions in preparation for a siege. When the Babis discovered that the prince was waiting for 'Abbas Quli Khan-i Larijani and his forces, they decided to strike first. On the night of Safar 29, 1265 (the night of January 24–25, 1849), some two hundred Babis sortied from their fortifications and routed the government forces.²⁸

24. Siphr, *Nāsikh al-tawārikh*, 3: 1019; Hidayat, *Rawzat al-ṣafā-yi Nāsirī*, 10: 433.

25. Siphr, *Nāsikh al-tawārikh*, 3: 1021 and Hidayat, *Rawzat al-ṣafā-yi Nāsirī*, 10: 434 write that in this attack the Babis massacred the people of the village where the militia of the Mazandarani chiefs had entrenched themselves. The Babi and Baha'i sources do not refer to any such massacre. Browne is obviously mistaken in stating that according to the author of the *Nuqtatu'l-Kāf*, the Babis, on this occasion, killed "the soldiers and villagers alike" (*Tārīkh-i-Jadīd*, 362). The *Nuqtatu'l-Kāf*, 161–62 only refers to the demolition of the village, and the appropriation of provisions. The text indicates that it was in retaliation for the villagers permitting the militia to use their village. Had the Babis killed the inhabitants, it would not make sense to refer only to the destruction of their village and appropriation of their property as the punishment inflicted on them.

26. Lutf 'Ali Mirza, untitled chronicle, 43–44, 75.

27. *Bahā'ī World*, 5: 58; Mehrabkhani, *Mullā Ḥusayn*, 250–51.

28. Lutf 'Ali Mirza, untitled chronicle, 91.

Three days later, °Abbas Quli Khan arrived with his forces, whose number gradually rose to about six thousand.²⁹ On the night of Rabi° al-Awwal 9, 1265 (the night of February 2–3, 1849) over two hundred Babis attacked °Abbas Quli Khan's troops. In the clash, some four hundred of the troops, including many chiefs, lost their lives. The high casualties among the troops were partly due to their shooting and slashing at each other in the dark in the confusion following the Babis' attack. This time the Babis suffered many casualties. More than forty of them, including Mulla Husayn-i Bushru°i, were killed during the battle or died later of their injuries. On the following day, the government troops attacked the fort, apparently in order to collect the wounded and some of their dead and bury other bodies where they had fallen. When they retreated, the Babis went out to the battlefield to fetch their own dead. They found that the Babi corpses had been decapitated, burned, or both. On seeing this, the Babis exhumed and decapitated the bodies of the soldiers, and mounted their heads on poles near the fort.³⁰

Soon the prince-governor returned with a new army, and °Abbas Quli Khan joined forces with him, the number of troops and irregulars totaling ten to twelve thousand.³¹ The fort was now completely surrounded, and supplies were cut off. In late February or early March, the troops stormed the fort but were repelled. At about this time, a detachment of soldiers with four batteries of cannons and mortars, and two howitzers arrived at Shaykh Tabarsi, and a heavy bombardment of the fort began in the second half of March.

By early April the Babis had used up all their supplies of rice and grain, and had already slaughtered and consumed the thirty or so horses that were left, living on grass from then on. Since °Abbas Quli Khan and the Mazandaran chiefs had failed to capture the fort in spite of their superior forces, the government in Tehran dispatched Sulayman Khan-i Afshar (about April 9).³² Under Sulayman Khan's command, galleries were dug to the fort, and mines were placed under two of its towers. When preparations were completed, the mines were ignited and the fort was stormed from four directions. This second general assault also failed. Shortly afterwards, thirty or more Babis deserted the fort, but their leader and perhaps a few others were killed and the rest captured by the troops and killed later. By this time the troops had

29. Lutf °Ali Mirza, untitled chronicle, 99; Semino's letter of June 16, 1849, Barthélemy Semino, *Zhinirāl Semino dar khidmat-i Īrān-i °aṣr-i Qājār wa jang-i Harāt: 1236-1266 hijri-yi qamari*, ed. Mansoureh Ettehadieh (Nizam-Mafi) and S. Mir-Mohammad Sadegh (Tehran, 1997), 192.

30. Lutf °Ali Mirza, untitled chronicle, 112; Mir Abu Talib, untitled narrative, 16; °Ala°i, ed. *Tārīkh-i Samandar*, 510–11; Mahjur, *Waqā°i°-i mīmiyya*, 64–65; Browne, ed., *Nuṣṣatu°l-Kāf*, 177; Sipīhr, *Nāsikh al-tawārikh*, 3: 1027; Hidayat, *Rawzat al ṣafā-yi Nāṣiri*, 10: 439–40.

31. Lutf °Ali Mirza, untitled chronicle, 119; °Ala°i, ed. *Tārīkh-i Samandar*, 515; Ferrier to de LaHitte, February 21, 1850, cited in Momen, *Bābī and Bahā°ī Religions*, 95.

32. It seems that °Abbas Quli Khan was suspected of having become a Babi. See Semino's letter of June 16, 1849, Semino, *Zhinirāl Semino*, 192.

discovered that the Babis left the fort at night to collect grass, so they kept up their firing on the area around the fort through the night. From then on, for the last nineteen days of the siege, they were reduced to eating the putrefied meat, skin, and bones of their dead horses, and even the leather of their saddles.

The siege was brought to an end when the prince-governor resorted to treachery. The Babis were promised safety if they left the fort. Copies of the Qur'an were sealed and sent to confirm the pledge. On the afternoon of Jumada al-Ṣani 15, 1265/May 9, 1849, the surviving Babis, some 220 in number, evacuated the fort. Once outside, they were disarmed and massacred (May 10, 1849).³³

An Analysis of the Nature of the Babi Movement

The Babi clashes with the state have often been portrayed as uprisings against Qajar rule. In his 1939 thesis, M. S. Ivanov proposed that the Babi movement was "a popular mass movement. . . directed against the ruling class."³⁴ In his analysis, the economic crisis in Iran accounted for the emergence of the movement. In a more recent paper, Kurt Greussing argues for a similar view.³⁵ According to his study, the Babi movement was initially a religious reform movement, which sought converts among urban elites. However, when the Babis failed to make any headway among the elite, they gradually turned to the urban poor and the peasants, and after 1848, under the pressure of the economic crisis, the movement turned into a social revolution.

There were certainly economic problems in Iran in mid-nineteenth century. A study of the social background of the Babis involved in the clashes with the state, however, does not indicate any large representation of peasants or urban craftsmen and artisans, that is, the groups that would be most affected by an economic crisis.³⁶ In the case of Shaykh Tabarsi, of some 360 identified Babi participants, the occupational background of about 220 is known. Of these, more than sixty percent belonged to the 'ulamā' class, while craftsmen, skilled and unskilled urban workers, and peasants together

33. Mir Abu Talib, untitled narrative, 21, 32-33, 36; see also Browne, ed., *Nuqtatu'l-Kāf*, 192; Nabil, *Dawn-Breakers*, 399-400; Siphr, *Nāsikh al-tawārīkh*, 3: 1035-36.

34. V. Minorsky, review of M. S. Ivanov: *Babidskie Vosstaniya v Irane (1848-1852)*, Trudy Instituta Vostokovedeniia, AN SSSR, vol. 30, Moscow 1939, in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 11 (1946): 878.

35. Kurt Greussing, "The Babi movement in Iran 1844-52: from merchant protest to peasant revolution," in János M. Bak, Gerhard Benecke, eds., *Religion and Rural Revolt* (Manchester, 1984), 256-69.

36. See Moojan Momen, "The Social Basis of the Bābī Upheavals in Iran (1848-53): A Preliminary Analysis," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 15 (1983): 157-83. Momen has discussed Ivanov's analysis, but many of the points he raises apply equally to Greussing's article.

accounted for some twenty-five percent.³⁷ Of all the participants, however, craftsmen, laborers, and peasants probably constituted more than twenty-five percent, as they are more likely to have remained unidentified. The villagers who joined the Babis at Shaykh Tabarsi seem to have been motivated by religious concerns, and not by a desire to revolt against the government. For instance, in the case of the villages Sangsar and Shahmirzad, it was the acceptance by one of their *'ulamā'* of the religious claims of the Babis, which he had been appointed to investigate, that prompted the villagers to go to Shaykh Tabarsi. In general, the picture that emerges from the eyewitness accounts of the Shaykh Tabarsi conflict do not reveal a radical social outlook on the part of the Babis, but rather their deep religious concerns.

Browne and other scholars, such as Algar and MacEoin, propose interpretations of the Babi-state clashes that emphasize the religious, as opposed to the socioeconomic, grounds for the conflict. According to Browne, the Babis aimed to replace Qajar rule with a Babi theocracy in the immediate future, and to establish a reign of the saints.³⁸ Algar sees the Babi movement as a heresy of Shi'ī origin that sought to overthrow orthodoxy by force. He writes that the Babi rebellion began with the march of Mulla Husayn and his party toward Mazandaran, but this "fact was obscured by the death of Muḥammad Shāh, and the Bābī revolt became one element in the chaos surrounding the succession."³⁹ More recently, MacEoin has expressed the view that "[b]etween 1847 and 1850, following the Bāb's announcement that he himself was the Qā'im, his followers took up arms to begin the last crusade or share in the messianic woes in the hope of hastening the final restitution of things."⁴⁰ Like Browne, MacEoin states that the Babis intended to establish a "Bābī theocracy" and "the immediate rule of the saints on earth."⁴¹ He links the clashes between the Babis and the state to the Babi concept of an "offensive" *jihād*, but maintains that at Shaykh Tabarsi and elsewhere, the Babis proclaimed a "defensive" *jihād* against the Qajar state and its forces.⁴² MacEoin suggests that the Babis attempted unsuccessfully to transform these local upheavals into "a more widely-based revolutionary struggle against the forces of unbelief," and he gives a number of factors for their failure.⁴³

37. Peter Smith and Moojan Momen, "The Bābī Movement: A Resource Mobilization Perspective," in Peter Smith, ed., *In Iran: Studies in Bābī and Bahā'ī History* (Los Angeles, 1986), 3: 72; cf. Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*, 359.

38. Browne, *Materials*, xv; idem, *Tārīkh-i-Jadīd*, xvi.

39. Algar, *Religion and State in Iran*, 144.

40. Denis MacEoin, "From Babism to Baha'ism: Problems of Militancy, Quietism, and Conflation in the Construction of a Religion," *Religion* 13 (1983): 222.

41. Denis MacEoin, "Bahā'ī Fundamentalism and the Academic Study of the Bābī Movement," *Religion* 16 (1986): 70; idem, "From Babism to Baha'ism," 222.

42. Denis MacEoin, "Babism," *Encyclopædia Iranica* (henceforth *Elr*), 3: 316; idem, "Babi Concept of Holy War," 121.

43. MacEoin, "Babi Concept of Holy War," 121; cf. idem, "Babism," 316; idem, "Bahā'ī Fundamentalism," 70.

The theme of *jihād* is treated extensively in the early writings of the Bab. In different passages of the *Qayyūm al-Asmāʾ*,⁴⁴ warfare is conditioned on God's leave and on the command of the Bab and of the Imam, and the believers are instructed to purchase arms in expectation of a struggle. The concept of *jihād* in this work and others written before the Persian *Bayān* resembles the Shiʿi concept of *jihād*.⁴⁴ There are also references to, and regulations regarding, *jihād* in some later writings by the Bab, including the *Bayān*, written in late 1847. The concept of *jihād* in these writings clearly centers round the authority of a Babi king. For instance, the *Bayān* instructs the Babi kings that people should be brought into the faith in the same way that it was done in Islam. They may use conquest to convert people, although, if possible, other means should be used, such as the seizure of property. There are also some harsh regulations in the Persian *Bayān* regarding non-believers. However, there is an instruction that gentleness, not violence, should be used in persuasion.⁴⁵

References to Babi kings in the Persian *Bayān* seem to anticipate the appearance of some form of a Babi state (or states). The laws of the *Bayān* regarding holy war, however, are given as instructions to Babi kings, implying that a Babi king must be in power before offensive *jihād* can be carried out. There are no provisions here for rank-and-file Babis to declare offensive *jihād* without a Babi king. Neither are there provisions for the Babis to wage a *jihād* in order to put a Babi king into power. In the *Dalāʾil-i sabʿa*, the Bab states that when the believers see that people are not guided by proofs, then there is no way for unbelievers to be guided other than through the Babis asking God to raise up one who would bring all men into the true faith. He adds that today there is no way of guiding the followers of various prophets except through a strong king who would bring them into the true faith.⁴⁶ The argument that the Babis wanted to establish a "Babi theocracy" through a "holy war" is primarily based on references to Babi kings in the Bab's "later" writings.⁴⁷ However, these same writings, in effect, precluded the possibility of waging an offensive *jihād*, as only a Babi king could conduct an offensive *jihād*, and such a king did not exist.

It is commonly acknowledged that a Babi offensive *jihād* was never declared. In MacEoin's treatment of the subject, there is a tension between the Babi concept of offensive *jihād*, as he interprets it, and the actual defensive warfare of the Babis. He tries to resolve this tension by suggesting that offensive *jihād* was not declared, "probably because it was regarded as wrong to declare a holy war unless there was a reasonable chance of success— a condition clearly lacking in the case of the Bābīs."⁴⁸ Again, consid-

44. MacEoin, "Babi Concept of Holy War," 107.

45. Bab, *Bayān* (n.p., n.d.), 158, 120, 63. For regulations of the *Bayān* concerning *jihād* and non-believers, see MacEoin, "Babi Concept of Holy War," 108–109.

46. Bab, *Dalāʾil-i sabʿa*, 42–43.

47. MacEoin, "Bahāʾī Fundamentalism," 70.

48. MacEoin, "Babi Concept of Holy War," 121.

ering the way the concept of *jihād* is developed in the Bab's later writings, it seems more likely that the issue never arose.

The above discussion about the implications of the concept of *jihād* in the writings of the Bab does not consider the extent to which the Babis were acquainted with these texts, or how they interpreted them. While the regulations about *jihād* and the severe laws formulated by the Bab are relevant to the Babi-state conflicts to the extent that they influenced the actions of the Babis or provoked reactions from the 'ulamā' and the state, they cannot by themselves explain the Babis' motives. To address this question, it is essential to investigate the course of the events and circumstances of the Babi-state clashes as well as the Babi actors' understanding of those events. Such an analysis will provide insight into whether or not the Babis were intent on insurrection or establishing a Babi theocracy by means of holy war. In the next section, the events and circumstances around the Babis' march to Mazandaran and their entrenchment at Shaykh Tabarsi will be analyzed to establish the context in which the Babis' actions took place and to find possible explanations for them. The Babis' understanding of their situation and their actions will also be studied, as this is crucial in clarifying their objectives. In this analysis, the three Babi and Baha'i accounts by survivors of the event, Lutf 'Ali Mirza-yi Shirazi, Mir Abu Talib-i Shahmirzadi, and Haji Nasir-i Qazwini, are particularly relevant. Of these three, Lutf 'Ali Mirza's account is the earliest and most important. The history by Mahjur-i Zawara'i and the *Nuqtatu'l-Kāf* are also significant, since they predate the final Baha'i-Azali break of the 1860s.

The Objectives of the Babis at Shaykh Tabarsi

In his narrative, Nabil refers to the raising of the black standard by the group of Babis, as they embarked on their march to Mazandaran. This issue has attracted the attention of various scholars. In the Shi'i prophetic traditions, there are references to black standards proceeding from Khurasan, which signify the advent of the Mahdi. According to Nabil, Mulla Husayn unfurled the "Black Standard" on the Bab's instruction as he set out toward Mazandaran. Nabil cites a tradition that refers to the black standard, and adds that this standard "was carried aloft all the way from the city of Mashhad to the shrine of Shaykh Ṭabarsī," where it was flown until the fall of the fort.⁴⁹ Commenting on Nabil's statements, various scholars have drawn attention to the significance of the raising of black standards.⁵⁰ It is argued that apart from its messianic overtones, fulfilling literally the prophecies about the appearance of the Qa'im in Khurasan, raising black standards also had political implications. It was exactly by such an act that the Abbasids began their rebellion against the Umayyads, which ended with the overthrow of the latter. However, the main issue is what such an act meant to the Babis, and

49. Nabil, *Dawn-Breakers*, 324–25, 351.

50. Momen, "Social Basis of the Bābī Upheavals," 161; MacEoin, "Babi Concept of Holy War," 115.

how it was interpreted by the authorities and the public. In this respect, it is noteworthy that there is no evidence that contemporaries attached any political significance to such an act. The Qajar chronicles are silent on this issue, and there is no mention of the government being alarmed by it, or taking any notice of it at all. An explanation for this, that is how a banner could be flown without attracting suspicion, can be found in the custom of *chāwush-khwānī*.⁵¹

The practice of *chāwush-khwānī* (recitation by a *chāwush* or guide) was common at the time and was associated with pilgrimage. The *chāwush* would chant poems praising the Prophet or the Imams and call on people to take him on as a guide for pilgrimage either to Mecca, the ‘Atabat, or Mashhad. He would hoist a special banner to announce the imminent pilgrimage.⁵² Lutf ‘Ali Mirza’s account indicates that the Babis were apprehensive about being attacked, and attempted to conceal their identity by claiming to be pilgrims on their way to Karbala.⁵³ Considering the practice of *chāwush-khwānī*, it would seem that Mulla Husayn’s party could have flown a black banner without necessarily arousing suspicion. However, there is evidence suggesting that Nabil’s portrayal of this event is not entirely correct.

The earlier accounts do not mention any such episode. In fact, Lutf ‘Ali Mirza’s account contains evidence that makes it seem rather doubtful. Lutf ‘Ali Mirza had joined Mulla Husayn’s band shortly before their entry into Mazandaran. He comments in passing on Mulla Husayn’s black garment, saying that this was the meaning of the black standard from Khurasan reported in the tradition.⁵⁴ This suggests that the travelers were not flying black standards at all at that time. There is corroboratory evidence in the account by Mir Abu Talib-i Shahmirzadi, who joined the Babis after they entered the shrine of Shaykh Tabarsi. He refers several times in his narrative to the prophecies about the black standards having been fulfilled. However, he implies that the Babis “understood Mulla Husayn to be the Standards from Khurasan”.⁵⁵ The *Nuqtatu’l-Kāf*, too, contains references to the various standards in the prophecies. It is stated that the “Khurasani Standard” refers to “janāb-i Sayyid al-Shuhadā, who set out from Khurasan (Mulla Husayn-i Bushru’i).”⁵⁶ Considering this evidence, it seems likely that the Babis did not carry black standards on the way to Mazandaran. Even if they did, they apparently did not attach any eschatological significance to them. Rather, it

51. I am grateful to Mr. Saleh Molavinegad for drawing my attention to the practice of *chāwush-khwānī*.

52. Ğolām Ḥosayn Yūsofī, “Ĉāvoš,” *Elr* 5: 101–102.

53. Lutf ‘Ali Mirza, untitled chronicle, 2–4, 8–9.

54. Lutf ‘Ali Mirza, untitled chronicle, 19.

55. Mir Abu Talib, untitled narrative, 37; cf. 9, 10, 11. Nabil had access to a different manuscript of Mir Abu Talib’s account. In his rendering of the passage in question, Mulla Husayn is “the bearer” of the “Black Standard.” Nabil, *Dawn-Breakers*, 407.

56. Browne, ed., *Nuqtatu’l-Kāf*, 153.

was the act of Mulla Husayn and his party, who set out on a march from Khurasan, which was viewed as the fulfillment of the prophecies.

Elsewhere in his narrative, Nabil gives the number of the Babis at Shaykh Tabarsi as 313.⁵⁷ Like the black standard, the figure 313 has eschatological significance. According to certain traditions, the companions of the Mahdi number 313, which is the numerical value of the word *jaysh* (army), that is, the *jaysh* of the Mahdi.⁵⁸ It is not unlikely that an emphasis on the literal fulfillment of such prophecies led to the circulation among the Babis of stories about the carrying of the black standard and the number of participants at Shaykh Tabarsi being exactly 313, which subsequently found their way into Nabil's narrative.

Evidence as to why Mulla Husayn and a large number of Babis were heading for Mazandaran is scanty. Mulla Husayn had just been ordered to leave Mashhad. The region was unstable due to a prolonged state of rebellion, and conflicts between the Babis and the local people would have worsened the situation. Mulla Husayn reportedly once remarked that his purpose in leaving Mashhad had been to "exalt the word of God".⁵⁹ However, it seems that he had another, more concrete aim. One of the objectives of the conference of Badasht was to deliberate on how the Bab could be rescued from prison. Awarah, the author of a late Baha'i history, states that it was decided there that the Babis should go to the prison fortress in Azerbaijan, and once there ask Muhammad Shah to release the Bab, or liberate him by force if necessary, avoiding conflict as far as possible.⁶⁰ According to Shaykh Kazim-i Samandar, Mulla Husayn's party intended to proceed to Azerbaijan to meet the Bab.⁶¹ This statement is significant, as it occurs in Samandar's short biography of one of the survivors of the Mazandaran conflict whom he had met. Of the Qajar chroniclers, only Hidayat states that Mulla Husayn's original intention was to go to Chahriq to liberate the Bab.⁶² He also writes that the Babis intended to begin the *khurūj*.

The existing sources do not clarify the Bab's attitude towards his followers' plan to rescue him. Some sources report that while on his way to the prison fortress of Maku, the Bab sent a message to a certain Sulayman Khan-i Afshar-i Sa'in-Qal'a'i, asking for assistance. A group of Babis, being informed of this, offered to rescue the Bab, but he declined their

57. Nabil, *Dawn-Breakers*, 354.

58. See Mohammad 'Ali Amir-Moezzi, "Eschatology, iii. In Imami Shi'ism," in *Elr* 8: 578.

59. Lutf 'Ali Mirza, untitled chronicle, 18; cf. 88.

60. Awarah, *al-Kawātib al-durriyya*, 1: 129. Awarah erroneously writes Maku instead of Chahriq. Probably due to the bastinado inflicted on the Bab, the Babis determined to rescue their leader. See Hidayat, *Rawzat al-ṣafā-yi Nāṣirī*, 10: 428.

61. 'Ala'i, ed. *Tārīkh-i Samandar*, 168.

62. Hidayat, *Rawzat al-ṣafā-yi Nāṣirī* 10: 422, 428–29; cf. Browne, *A Traveller's Narrative*, 2: 189.

request.⁶³ Sulayman Khan had been an admirer of the late head of the Shaykhi school, from which the majority of the early Babis were recruited. He was known for his wealth, and may have been in a position to arrange for the rescue of the Bab. However, it seems that in this case, the Bab's message was meant as a challenge to him.

The rescue of the Bab, if carried out by force, would amount to interfering in the affairs of the authorities. Apparently, the Babis regarded such an act as legitimate, as it was in response to persecution. It is difficult to conjecture the course of action that the Babis would have taken had they succeeded in rescuing the Bab. Nowhere in the available Babi or Baha'i accounts is there any clear indication of their future plans. The only clue given is that they intended to go to the Shi'ī shrine cities of Iraq.⁶⁴ If this is taken at face value, it could suggest that the Babis intended to leave the country. However, considering the fate of the Bab's emissary to the 'Atabat,⁶⁵ it is hard to imagine that they would have fared any better there, in the heartland of the Shi'ī world, than in Iran.

It is important to have a sense of the context in which the Babis' march to Mazandaran took place. As mentioned earlier, according to Wright, the government issued orders for the persecution of the Babis at about this time. This is corroborated by Lutf 'Ali Mirza's account. He writes that, entering Mazandaran, the Babis encountered the party of Prince Khanlar Mirza, the new governor of the province. When the prince discovered that they were Babis, he said to several of them: "You are all Babis and *mufsid-i fi'l-arz* (literally, "the corrupt upon the land," from the Qur'an 18:94), and killing you is obligatory, and the shah [Muhammad Shah] has ordered that wherever they find you, they kill you."⁶⁶ Other sources do not refer to Muhammad Shah giving orders for killing the Babis. Still, the incident reflects the tension that surrounded the Babis at the time. Previously, on Lutf 'Ali Mirza's advice, Mulla Husayn had instructed the Babis to stand guard at night.

When the Babis, near Barfurush, received news of the death of Muhammad Shah, they headed toward the town. The Babis must have been aware that trouble could break out there due to the presence of Sa'id al-'Ulama', an influential cleric who was hostile toward the Babis. However, it appears that they had no alternative. Shortly before this, they had been

63. Nabil, *Dawn-Breakers*, 235–36; Fazil-i Mazandarani, *Zuhūr al-haqq*, 3: 75. MacEoin refers to this incident, but confuses Sulayman Khan-i Afshar-i Sa'in-Qal'a'i with Sulayman Khan-i Afshar, later entitled Sahib Ikhtiyar, who, as he writes, was "one of the country's leading military men" ("Babi Concept of Holy War," 106). It was this Sulayman Khan who fought against the Babis at Shaykh Tabarsi. For Sahib Ikhtiyar, see Mahdi Bamdad, *Sharḥ-i ḥāl-i rijāl-i Īrān dar qarn-i 12 wa 13 wa 14 hijrī* (Tehran, 1968-69), 2: 116–18; for Sulayman Khan-i Sa'in-Qal'a'i, see Fazil-i Mazandarani, *Zuhūr al-haqq*, 3: 74–75.

64. Lutf 'Ali Mirza, untitled chronicle, 88; cf. Browne, ed., *Nuqtatu'l-Kāf*, 166; Siphir, *Nāsikh al-tawārīkh*, 3: 1014; Hidayat, *Rawzat al-ṣafā-yi Nāshiri*, 10: 431.

65. See Momen, "Trial of Mullā 'Alī Basṭāmī."

66. Lutf 'Ali Mirza, untitled chronicle, 14.

forced to leave the village of Arim because of complaints of some of the local people who had objected to the Babis occupying their pastureland; others had said that foodstuffs had become scarce because the Babis paid so well that everybody went to them to sell their rice. The people of Arim had threatened to attack the Babis if they did not leave.⁶⁷ Muhammad Shah's death complicated this situation radically. The Babis could no longer move from place to place, as they risked attacks by robbers exploiting the temporary anarchy or by local people or authorities who might take them for a band of plunderers.⁶⁸ A letter, written from the provincial capital Sari shortly after Muhammad Shah's death, reads: "... Saree [Sari] ... is the only town not in a disturbed state in all Mazandaran, and the roads are infested by robbers in every direction."⁶⁹ Barfurush was the major town most easily accessible from Arim. Here, the Babis would be able to find provisions sufficient for their numbers until the situation stabilized.

Describing the Babis' entry into Barfurush, neither of the two main official histories of the period states that the Babis were attacked. Lutf 'Ali Mirza's eyewitness account clearly states that they were, as do other Babi and later Baha'i sources, and Shaykh al-'Ajam's account seems to confirm this. The latter writes that news reached Barfurush that five hundred Babis had rebelled and were intent on making a surprise attack. The people of Barfurush armed themselves and waited for the Babis in order to kill them. When the Babis arrived, a clash occurred, during which Mulla Husayn killed seven or eight people.⁷⁰ There may have been more casualties among the townspeople in this first clash. Nevertheless, they were relatively few, and this suggests that the Babis had not intended to attack the inhabitants. When Mulla Husayn and his fellow Babis made sorties on the besieging troops at Shaykh Tabarsi, they proved capable of imposing significant casualties on their enemies.

After leaving Barfurush, the Babis reluctantly agreed that Khusraw-i Qadi-Kala'i and his armed men should escort them. The Babis were followed by a vengeful mob from Barfurush, and they were strangers to the inhospitable surroundings of Mazandaran, with its narrow paths, thick forests, and impassable marshland. When the Babis discovered that their escort intended to kill them and steal their goods, they killed Khusraw in the middle of the night, and attacked and dispersed his men. Leaving behind all their belongings, the Babis pursued the escort and attacked a village, which they thought was Qadi-Kala. On returning, the Babis discovered that none of their possessions were left. Then the Babis made their way, with the help of

67. Lutf 'Ali Mirza, untitled chronicle, 20–21.

68. Cf. 'Ala'i, ed., *Tārīkh-i Samandar*, 504.

69. Anonymous letter, dated September 12, 1848, "Translation: Extract of a letter from a person sent to M. [Mazandaran] by Colonel F. [Farrant]," "Enclosed Farrant's No. 85 of 1848," Public Record Office, FO 60/138, London; cf. Lutf 'Ali Mirza, untitled chronicle, 25–26.

70. Dorn, "Nachträge zu dem Verzeichniss," 206–207.

a local guide whom they had taken prisoner, to the nearby shrine of Shaykh Tabarsi.

The Babis decided to stay at Shaykh Tabarsi because they could not move on. The Babi survivors' accounts show that the party's leader, Mulla Husayn, was aware that they had reached the end of their journey. On entering the shrine, he addressed his companions, saying that this was the place all of them would be killed.⁷¹ Lutf 'Ali Mirza describes the agony of the Babis when they heard that there was no escape from "martyrdom." After Muhammad Shah's death, it was no longer possible for them to proceed with their initial plan of rescuing the Bab. Apart from the general lawlessness in the region and the risk of being attacked by robbers, the Babis' enemies wanted to avenge the blood of those killed in Barfurush, as well as that of Khusraw and his men. The Babis would make an easy target for their enemies if they attempted to travel the narrow byways of Mazandaran. Their dialect as well as their dress would reveal that they were strangers.⁷² Haji Nasir's account indicates that the Babis expected the townspeople to attack.⁷³ It seems that word had also been sent to nearby villages that the Babis were infidels, whom it was lawful to kill and plunder.⁷⁴ For a time after the Babis entered the shrine of Shaykh Tabarsi, the people from Qadi-Kala and other villages robbed all the strangers in the area and even killed a few.⁷⁵ In short, the Babis were trapped, so they began erecting some rudimentary defenses around the shrine. The fact that the first major attack on the Babis did not come for three months was only due to the absence of the chiefs and notables of Mazandaran, who had been obliged to go to Tehran for the coronation of the shah.⁷⁶ In the meantime the inhabitants of Qadi-Kala attacked the Babis at the shrine.⁷⁷

Under these circumstances, the motifs of *jihād* and martyrdom emerged fully. The Babis, like the general Shi'ī population of Iran, were well acquainted with these motifs. To them, the advent of the Mahdi marked the culmination of Shi'ī history. As the struggle began, it appeared to the Babis that the episode of Karbala was being reenacted. For them, the Qajars were the new Umayyads, and their clerical enemies were the eschatological figures who would wage war against the Mahdi. The first major attack occurred in Muharram, the very month in which the Imam Husayn was martyred. Mulla Husayn referred specifically to this in his interview with the

71. Lutf 'Ali Mirza, untitled chronicle, 54.

72. Cf. Lutf 'Ali Mirza, untitled chronicle, 61; Mahjur, *Waqā'i-i mīmiyya*, 37.

73. 'Ala'i, ed., *Tārīkh-i Samandar*, 504.

74. Lutf 'Ali Mirza, untitled chronicle, 36.

75. Mir Abu Talib, untitled narrative, 3.

76. Sipīhr, *Nāsikh al-tawārīkh*, 3: 1017; Hidayat, *Rawzat al-ṣafā-yi Nāširī*, 10: 433.

77. Browne, ed., *Nuqtatu'l-Kāf*, 160; cf. Nabil, *Dawn-Breakers*, 345.

prince's emissary, and drew a parallel to the Umayyads and the Imam Husayn.⁷⁸

Certain factors indicate that the Babis were not intent on insurrection. Their limited arms and equipment, consisting initially of swords and daggers, eighteen muskets, and a few horses, as well as the many children and elderly among the party, made them unfit for a struggle against a trained army.⁷⁹ If the actions of the Babis at Shaykh Tabarsi were part of a Babi plan aimed at overthrowing the state, it seems reasonable that they would have sought to take advantage of the instability created by the death of the shah. It was then that uprisings and disorder broke out in many parts of the country and Salar, the leader of the revolt in Khurasan, used the opportunity to consolidate his position. For another two years, his rebellion engaged a substantial part of the country's military resources. Without support from outside, the fall of the fort of Shaykh Tabarsi was obviously only a matter of time.⁸⁰ Therefore, preparing for defensive warfare at Shaykh Tabarsi would not serve any end in itself if the other Babis did not conduct insurrectionary activities in other parts of the country. It would seem that they were in a position to do so, if that was what they intended. Mulla Muhammad 'Ali-yi Zanjani Hujjat, who was to lead the Babis of his town in the most severe of the Babi-state clashes two years later, used the opportunity offered by the death of the shah to escape from the capital, apparently while the Mazandaran episode was unfolding. He had a large following in Zanjan, and had been in contact with them during his confinement in Tehran. The first major attack on Shaykh Tabarsi came in late December, three and a half months after the death of the shah, and the conflict lasted until May, so it seems that the Zanjani Babis would have had sufficient time to organize a revolt there, had they been instructed to do so. Another Babi leader, Aqa Sayyid Yahya-yi Darabi Wahid, who two years later would be involved in the first Nayriz conflict, had many followers in this town, as well as in Yazd. He, too, would seem to have been in a position to stage a rebellion. Neither Hujjat nor Wahid, however, nor any of the other Babis, attempted to organize a revolt. In spite of his imprisonment, the Bab was in communication with his followers, and while at one point he may have instructed them to join the Babis at Shaykh Tabarsi, he never issued an order for a Babi offensive *jihād*.

The early Babi and later Baha'i narratives of the episode do not indicate that the participants at Shaykh Tabarsi aspired to establish a Babi theocracy. The claim of the court historian Sipihr that Mulla Husayn promised

78. Lutf 'Ali Mirza, untitled chronicle, 87; Mahjur, *Waqā'i'-i mīmiyya*, 42.

79. Cf. Lutf 'Ali Mirza, untitled chronicle, 43–44, 80.

80. It is always factors outside the fortress that decide the success or failure of the defenders in a siege. "In war history, there is no known case of a defender, once encircled in a fortress, being able to compel the attacker to call off a siege alone and with his own resources. Defense of a fortress is always a battle to gain time." Gert Bode, "Siege," in *International Military and Defense Encyclopedia* (Washington D. C. and New York, 1993), 5: 2417.

his fellow Babis kingship and rulership of various lands⁸¹ stands in sharp contrast to the statements in these accounts that Mulla Husayn, soon after entering Mazandaran, warned his companions that all of them would be killed. He told them that whoever wanted to leave had to do it then, and that "it will not be possible to leave later. They will close the roads and spill our blood. Soon the enemies will attack from all sides."⁸²

The eyewitness accounts show that the Babis did not view themselves as insurrectionists, and that in response to the authorities they denied such an objective. Several sources refer to an exchange of messages between the Babis and the prince-governor. According to Lutf 'Ali Mirza, the prince sent a strongly worded message to Mulla Husayn, accusing the Babis of stirring up mischief. The message also said that the Babis were no match for the imperial troops, and that they should leave the province. Lutf 'Ali Mirza then gives a summary of Mulla Husayn's exchange with the prince's emissary. The emissary remarked that the Babis should produce a miracle to prove the truth of their cause, and that the prince had said he would join forces with them if they did so, and attempt to overthrow Nasir al-Din Shah.⁸³ Mulla Husayn answered that the greatest miracle, the revelation of verses, had already been performed, but that they had denied it. He asked why they would not, instead, gather their 'ulamā' to engage in logical arguments with the Babis. If the 'ulamā' defeated the Babis in argument, they could kill them; otherwise, the 'ulamā' should accept the cause of truth.⁸⁴ The interview was interrupted when Mulla Husayn went to get Qud-dus's response to the prince's message. On returning, Mulla Husayn angrily related to the emissary what the Babis had suffered, saying that it was their enemies, and not the Babis, who had caused mischief. To the prince's remark about the superiority of the royal troops, Mulla Husayn answered that truth always prevailed over falsehood, and that if the whole world united to assail them, he would wage *jihād* against it, until he either was martyred or defeated his adversaries.⁸⁵

In response to the prince's remark about joining forces in order to overthrow the shah, Mulla Husayn said that he did not seek the sovereignty of the ephemeral world, and reproached the prince and his emissary for ascribing such objectives to the Babis, whom they did not even know. He also remarked that he had left Mashhad "with the aim of spreading the truth, in whatever way might prove possible, whether by overcoming falsehood or by means of the sword or by suffering martyrdom." He refused to leave the

81. Sipahr, *Nāsikh al-tawārikh*, 3: 1019.

82. Lutf 'Ali Mirza, untitled chronicle, 18–19; cf. Browne, ed., *Nuqtatu'l-Kāf*, 155–56; Nabil, *Dawn-Breakers*, 326.

83. Lutf 'Ali Mirza, untitled chronicle, 83–84. This indicates that the prince-governor believed the Babis were intent on insurrection.

84. Lutf 'Ali Mirza, untitled chronicle, 84–85. The request of the Babis at Shaykh Tabarsi for a meeting with the 'ulamā' is also reported in Mir Abu Talib's eyewitness account (untitled narrative, 12). See also Browne, ed., *Nuqtatu'l-Kāf*, 163.

85. Lutf 'Ali Mirza, untitled chronicle, 85–88.

province, saying, "I shall make manifest the cause of God by means of the sword," and added that he had been deceived in Barfurush by the "sardar," i.e. 'Abbas Quli Khan-i Larijani, and that he would not be deceived again and would not disperse his few companions, until they had overcome all their enemies or had all been killed. Mulla Husayn hinted at the prince's dishonesty and occasionally called the shah a puppy. He concluded the interview by writing a short answer to the prince.⁸⁶ Obviously, the Babis were not begging for mercy. Mulla Husayn's reference to 'Abbas Quli Khan and his hints at the prince's dishonesty indicate that he believed that the prince could not be relied on, and that his only intention was to get the Babis out of the fort, so that they could be killed more easily. Mulla Husayn's remarks, as related by Lutf 'Ali Mirza, also clearly show the Babis' determination to disseminate their cause and to defend themselves. Mulla Husayn's boldness also suggests that if the Babis at Shaykh Tabarsi really aimed to overthrow the shah, they would not have hesitated to say so.⁸⁷

Some of the sources mention a letter allegedly written by Quddus to the prince. According to the *Nuqtatu'l-Kāf*, Quddus, in answer to the prince's inquiry, said that their cause was religious and not worldly, and also wrote: "Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh is a false king and his helpers shall be punished in the fires of God; we are the true sovereign, who seek for the good-pleasure of God."⁸⁸ The tone of this passage in the *Nuqtatu'l-Kāf* agrees, to some extent, with the attitude of the Babis at Shaykh Tabarsi depicted above. However, it is unlikely that the author(s) of the *Nuqtatu'l-Kāf* would have

86. Lutf 'Ali Mirza, untitled chronicle, 88–89.

87. In his paper "Babi Concept of Holy War" (115–17), MacEoin provides an analysis of the objectives of the Babis at Shaykh Tabarsi. He cites passages from Lutf 'Ali Mirza's history regarding this exchange, and comments that Mulla Husayn refused to leave Mazandaran as "requested" by the prince (116). MacEoin gives the impression that the Babis would not listen to reason. To call the prince's demand that the Babis should leave Mazandaran a "request" is misleading. The prince had received emphatic instructions from Nasir al-Din Shah in person to eradicate the Babis, and shortly afterwards the shah had issued a royal decree ordering him to "cleanse the realm of this filthy and reprobate sect, so that not a trace of them remains" (cited in Mehrabkhani, *Mullā Husayn*, 251). The Babis had heard about the prince's mission and knew that Mazandarani troops had been ordered to assist him. Some of the local people who had initially expressed their support for the Babis had now reneged. The prince's message was phrased in harsh language and accused the Babis of stirring up mischief (Lutf 'Ali Mirza, untitled chronicle, 82–83). This cannot be called a "request." MacEoin refers to Mulla Husayn's statement about not departing from Mazandaran "until the cause of God is manifested," ("Babi Concept of Holy War," 116) but leaves out his remark that he had once been deceived by 'Abbas Quli Khan in Barfurush, and that he would not be deceived again (Lutf 'Ali Mirza, untitled chronicle, 89). All this makes it clear that Mulla Husayn believed that the prince's "request" was a trick, and that if the Babis agreed and left the fort, they would be killed.

88. Browne, ed., *Nuqtatu'l-Kāf*, 163, 166. The translation is cited from MacEoin, "Babi Concept of Holy War," 116.

had firsthand information about the contents of such a letter. The tone of this work reflects the antagonism that many Babis had developed toward the authorities by the time it was written, i.e. following the execution of the Bab and the death of a large number of Babis in clashes with government forces. In the *Nuqtatu'l-Kāf*, no effort is made to hide animosity toward the Qajars. It does not seem justified to conclude on this basis, however, that the Babis at Shaykh Tabarsi aimed at subverting the shah. Antipathy developed as a result of persecutions is not the same as a religious position requiring the overthrow of an illegitimate state. Considering the attitude expressed in the *Nuqtatu'l-Kāf* toward the ruling class, it is significant that the text consistently maintains that the sovereignty referred to by Quddus was not a material one. It is stated, for instance, that ‘Abbas Quli Khan had heard Quddus say, “we are the rightful sovereign, and the world is under our signet-ring, and all the kings in the East and the West will become humble before us.” He had believed that this “sovereignty” was like “the sovereignty of the people of oppression, meaning that dominion must be obtained through oppression and cruelty, and the blow of the sword, and covetousness for worldly possession, and all sorts of deception.” It is added that when ‘Abbas Quli Khan realized that this was not the case, he turned toward Nasir al-Din Shah to achieve his ends. The text goes on to explain that Quddus had intended a spiritual sovereignty, and that the humility of the kings referred to would appear with the passage of time.⁸⁹ It should be pointed out that such a revision of the idea of the Mahdi’s sovereignty was not necessarily a result of the severe persecutions that had taken place. As mentioned earlier, even before the Mazandaran conflict, the Bab and the Babi leaders had engaged in revising common views regarding the Mahdi’s appearance, distancing themselves from the idea of worldly sovereignty.

Evidence about the way the Babis at Shaykh Tabarsi understood their situation and actions, the circumstances that forced them to stay and fight, the fact that other Babis did not use the opportunity that the death of the shah offered to organize rebellions in other parts of the country as well as the insufficient armaments and the composition of Mulla Husayn’s party, all support the view that they were not intent on insurrection and that there was no such plan of a general Babi insurrection. Mulla Husayn and his companions knew that they were fighting a war they could not win. In their view, it was a defensive *jihād* that would be a testimony to the truth and power of the Babi cause.

Conclusion

The Shaykh Tabarsi conflict was seen by contemporaries as the result of a Babi revolt. When the Babis later became involved in warfare with the local authorities in other places, their actions were also interpreted as insurrectionary. This view was confirmed in the minds of the authorities and the public by the plot to assassinate Nasir al-Din Shah and the abortive attempt at

89. Browne, ed., *Nuqtatu'l-Kāf*, 162–63.

rebellion in Mazandaran in 1852. Though scholars have differed on whether to emphasize socioeconomic or religious aspects of the Babi-state conflicts, they, too, often interpret them as uprisings. Yet a close analysis of the background, the immediate circumstances, and the course of events of the Shaykh Tabarsi clash, as well as the Babi participants' understanding of their actions does not substantiate the view that the conflict was the result of an attempted insurrection. Rather, the analysis points to a combination of other factors: the build-up of tensions between the Babis and the surrounding Muslim community, and a critical concurrence of events immediately before the conflict.

The Babis' struggles cannot be interpreted as a simple reaction to factors outside their control. They were active supporters of doctrines and ideas that constituted a challenge to the establishment. The Bab advanced claims to charismatic religious authority, the most radical ones being the claims to mahdihood and prophethood. Likewise, the Babis publicly proclaimed their cause in the mosques and elsewhere. In doing so, they provoked attacks from the clerical establishment and the public. As it happened, these confrontations led to the intervention of the state. The conflict of Shaykh Tabarsi began only a few months after the Bab publicly claimed to be the Hidden Imam. The advancement of this claim was followed by the conference at Badasht, and from there, news spread that the Babis had broken the *shari'a*. The Babis' determination to announce the coming of the Mahdi, the clergy's resolve to eradicate this heresy, and the escalating climate of hostility toward the Babis were the background causes of the Shaykh Tabarsi conflict.

Against this background, certain crucial events coincided to precipitate the conflict. Mulla Husayn-i Bushru'i and his fellow Babis were on a march through Mazandaran in pursuance of their plan to rescue the Bab from prison when the country was thrown into chaos by the death of Muhammad Shah. Under these circumstances, the Babis were regarded as insurrectionists, though they were hardly outfitted for battle. The fact that their fellow Babis did not attempt to create uprisings when they had the opportunity indicates that there was no Babi plan of insurrection at the time. Soon the new premier and the young shah, motivated by political considerations—the latter also motivated to a great extent by religious bigotry—gave orders for the extirpation of the Babis. The Babis, on their part, were determined to defend themselves in what they saw as a holy war and a testimony to the truth of their cause.