

The Babi-State Conflicts of 1848-1853

The Babi movement was formed around the religious claims of a young merchant from Shiraz named Sayyid 'Ali Muhammad who in May 1844 called himself the *Bab* ("Gate"). To his contemporaries the term referred to an intermediary between the community of believers and the messianic figure of Islamic eschatology, the Mahdi. Soon the Bab advanced explicit claims to be the Mahdi in person, and even to be the recipient of a new revelation superseding Islam. By 1848 the movement had attracted tens of thousands of adherents. That year witnessed the beginning of a violent clash between the Babis and the Qajar state at Shaykh Tabarsi in Mazandaran. By the end of 1853, three other major clashes had occurred between the Babis and the state, once in Zanzan (1850), and twice in Nayriz (1850, 1853). These clashes shook the country and resulted in the deaths of perhaps 2,500 Babis and many more government troops. They shaped in significant ways the authorities' and the public's view of the Babi movement and later the Baha'i community.

The Babis' clashes with the state are often portrayed as a series of unsuccessful attempts to subvert the ruling dynasty. This is the view reflected in Western diplomatic reports and contemporary state chronicles. Many scholars have since accepted this view, though few have attempted to make use of the rich pool of sources available about these conflicts. On the basis of a reconstruction of these clashes from the available sources, and an analysis of the Babis' objectives, it can be argued that none of the clashes was the result of an attempted Babi revolt.

In the case of the Shaykh Tabarsi episode, it was when the Babi group found itself trapped in Mazandaran that they chose to fight a defensive holy war as a testimony to the truth of their cause. Against a background of increased public hostility toward the Babis and incidents of Babi persecutions, certain crucial events coincided to precipitate the Mazandaran conflict. The group of Babis were on a march through Mazandaran, planning to rescue the Bab from prison, when the country was thrown into chaos by the death of Muhammad Shah (September 1848). Under these circumstances, the Babis were seen as rebels, though they were not outfitted for battle. The fact that their fellow Babis in other parts of Iran did not attempt to create uprisings even though they had the opportunity indicates that there was no Babi plan of insurrection. Soon the new premier Amir Kabir and the seventeen-year old shah, Nasir al-Din, gave orders for the extirpation of the Babis in Mazandaran. The Babis were determined to defend themselves in what they saw as a holy war, in testimony to the truth of their cause.

In Nayriz, relations between the acting governor and the local populace were already strained, when a Babi leader who enjoyed wide local support entered the town to proclaim the

Babi cause, in defiance of the governor's ban. The latter moved to raise an army and attacked the Nayrizi Babis, who were resolved to fight along side their leader. They saw it as more honourable to take up a fight that appeared to be imposed upon them due to their religious convictions than to submit to the governor's demand and betray their leader. There is no indication that the Nayrizi Babis aimed at taking control of the town.

In Zanjan, tensions had built up between the Babis and the local religious and secular authorities, when the Babis rescued a young coreligionist who had been detained for a crime he had not committed. The governor had for some time been under instruction to arrest the local Babi leader, and now, supported by the local '*ulamā*', decided to do so. Soon the town was divided into two opposing camps, and the governor, with military assistance from the central government, engaged in a battle with the Babis. As in Nayriz, the Babis decided to stand on the side of their leader and fight, though the outcome was clear from the beginning. For them, the battle had religious significance, as they saw their sufferings as part of those calamities that according to Shi'i traditions would accompany the Mahdi's appearance. As for the '*ulamā*', it was a long-awaited chance to eradicate religious heresy from the town and establish their uncontested authority.

The second conflict in Nayriz was precipitated by the Babis' decision to revenge the death of their leader and assassinate the acting governor. A year previously, a group of Babis had made an abortive attempt on the life of the shah (August 1852). Against that background, it was to be expected that the Nayrizi Babis' act would lead to a full-scale conflict with the state. The experience of the first Nayriz conflict and its aftermath had radicalised the Babis, and this predisposed them to respond to a call for revenge. However, the Babis' action was not a revolt with the aim of seizing power.

Scholars' views of the Babis as insurrectionists have, to a great extent, been shaped by the abortive attempt on the life of the shah in 1852, which was carried out by a small group of radical Babis seeking revenge. Looking at this event, scholars have in retrospect interpreted the earlier clashes between the Babis and the Qajar state as a result of the Babis' insurrectionist activities. The state's active oppression of the Babis had, however, begun earlier, with the accession to power of Amir Kabir, the greatest secularist reformer of nineteenth century Iran. It may appear paradoxical that the man who aspired to establish a strong state, in which the influence of the clergy would be curbed and the rights of religious minorities secured, should have dealt the most severe blow to the Babis. To understand his actions one has to look at the circumstances under which he operated and his view of the Babis.

Amir Kabir regarded the Babi movement as religious in nature, but saw it as a threat to the 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 the previous premier had caused much discontent. The state treasury was almost empty, bringing the government to the verge of bankruptcy. Following the shah's death, disorder broke out in many parts of the country, and a major rebellion in Khurasan, which had begun a couple of years earlier, 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 concerns seem to have motivated Amir Kabir's determination to crush the Babis. The Babis, unlike the other non-Muslim segments of the population, who enjoyed a clear legal position according to Islamic law, were perceived as followers of a "filthy" sect, which posed a threat to religion and state alike. In Amir Kabir's view, the Babis were, as religious dissidents, responsible for causing tension and conflicts, which destabilized the position of the central government. In particular, he regarded the spread of the Babi movement among civil servants and state officials as extremely dangerous.

The second conflict in Nayriz was the last incidence of Babis involvement in a violent clash with state authorities. The majority of the Babis were not ever involved in clashes with the state, and the experience of the conflicts discouraged a confrontational attitude on their part. Many Babis abandoned the movement in the early 1850s. However, there were also many who retained their affiliation with the Babi religion, and later, under the leadership of Baha'u'llah who advocated quietism, were reorganised in a community whose gradually developing vision took it further from its Shi'i roots.

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. After all, if the Bab's claims to charismatic religious authority were acknowledged, it would mean an end of clerical power and authority. The Babis' activities publicly proclaiming their cause in mosques and elsewhere, provoked attacks from the clerical establishment and the public. As it happened, these confrontations led to the intervention of the state.