

The Bábí-State Conflict at Shaykh Ṭabarsí

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Abstract

The Shaykh Ṭabarsí episode was the first of four major clashes that occurred between the Bábís and the Qájár state from 1848 to 1853. It is often portrayed as a Bábí attempt to subvert the ruling dynasty. Primarily on the basis of a reconstruction of the episode from previously unpublished eyewitness accounts and other sources, and an analysis of the objectives of the Bábí participants, the paper argues that the Bábís were not intent on revolt. Rather, other background and immediate factors leading to the conflict are examined: the atmosphere of increased public hostility toward the Bábís, the latter's understanding of holy war, the political instability in the country, and the change of power that occurred shortly before the conflict.

Résumé

L'épisode de Shaykh Ṭabarsí fut le premier de quatre affrontements majeurs qui ont opposé les bábís et l'État du Qájár entre 1848 et 1853. L'épisode est souvent dépeint comme une tentative de la part des bábís de renverser la dynastie régnante. S'appuyant principalement sur une reconstitution de l'épisode à partir de récits de témoins oculaires et d'autres sources inédites, et d'une analyse des objectifs visés par les participants bábís, l'article fait valoir que les bábís ne cherchaient pas à inciter à une rébellion. L'auteur examine plutôt d'autres facteurs contextuels et précipitants du conflit, à savoir, le climat d'hostilité publique croissante envers les bábís, la compréhension que ces derniers avaient de la guerre sainte, l'instabilité politique qui régnait alors dans le pays, et le changement de gouverne survenu peu avant le conflit.

Resumen

El episodio de Shaykh Ṭabarsí fue el primero de cuatro encontronazos mayores que ocurrieron entre los bábíes y la soberanía Qájár de 1848 a 1853. Ocurre frecuentemente que el hecho se represente como un atentado de subvertir la dinastía imperante. Comenzando con la reconstrucción del episodio basado en declaraciones de testigos oculares y otras fuentes, más un análisis de los objetivos de los participantes bábíes, la disertación determina que los bábíes no intentaban sublevación. Más bien, se sondan los factores inmediatos y de fondo histórico conducentes al conflicto; el ambiente de recrudecimiento de hostilidad para con los bábíes, la comprensión de estos últimos del significado del concepto de guerra consagrada a fines religiosos, la inestabilidad política en el país, y el cambio del poder que ocurrió poco antes del conflicto.

INTRODUCTION

In May 1844 a young merchant from Shiraz, Siyyid 'Alí-Muḥammad, made the claim that he was the Báb (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 Ṭabarsí episode in Mazandaran, which became the first of four major clashes between the Bábís and the Qájár state.

The purpose of this article is to investigate the background, immediate circumstances, and events of the Shaykh Ṭabarsí conflict. It examines those developments, both in the political sphere and within the Bábí community, that led to the outbreak of open warfare in 1848, and focuses on the question of the objectives of the Bábí participants in the conflict. The Shaykh Ṭabarsí episode is often portrayed as the first of a series of unsuccessful attempts by the Bábís 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 Ṭabarsí and the later Bábí-state conflicts in the context of a Bábí concept of holy war ("Babi Concept").

His discussion, however, largely overlooks the implications of the development of this concept in the Báb's later writings. More significantly, a theoretical discussion of the Bábí concept of holy war, or jihad, cannot by itself explain the objectives of the Bábís involved. Rather, to find meaningful interpretations of the Bábís' intentions, it is essential to analyze carefully what happened and how the Bábí participants themselves understood their situation and their own actions. Such a study has been lacking in the case of the Shaykh Ṭabarsí 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 Bábí and Bahá'í eyewitness accounts of the clash, which are generally more reliable than other sources available. They also reflect the Bábí participants' perceptions of their circumstances and their own actions, which are crucial for understanding the event. This paper draws in particular on these accounts. It also discusses briefly the concept of jihad in the Báb's later writings. The paper argues that when the Bábís 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 Bábís at Shaykh Ṭabarsí also casts light on a broader and more essential issue: the nature of the Bábí movement in the early years of its development.¹

The Shaykh Ṭabarsí episode constituted a turning point in the history of the Bábí movement. It was the first time that the state, previously content with the incarceration of the Báb in a remote corner of the country, resolutely moved to suppress the Bábís. Near the end of the conflict, some ten thousand troops and irregulars were engaged in fighting a few hundred Bábís. The episode lasted eight months and left an estimated fifteen hundred dead, almost a third of whom were Bábís. After this experience, the state acted more swiftly and forcefully against the Bábís when new conflicts broke out in other parts of Iran. It was also during the conflict at Shaykh Ṭabarsí 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 Báb. Decades later its memory was still fresh in the minds of the people of Mazandaran.

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

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE BÁBÍ MOVEMENT

The spread of the Bábí movement in Iran and Iraq was swift and wide and provoked immediate opposition from the clergy. The Báb was banished to the far-off province of Azerbaijan, and some of his followers were maltreated. In October 1847 a young Shaykhí, probably assisted by two others, killed the powerful *mujtahid* of Qazvin, Mullá Muḥammad-Taqíy-i-Baraghání, who was known for his anti-Shaykhí and anti-Bábí propaganda. The assassination intensified the hostility of the clergy toward the Bábís, several of whom were killed. This was the first instance of Bábís being put to death in Iran. In April 1848 the Báb was brought to Tabriz, the provincial capital, to be interrogated in the presence of the crown prince and the clergy.² On this occasion the Báb 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 Bábís gathered at Badasht, a small village in Khurasan, and here the movement effectively broke with Islam. Shortly afterwards, a group of Bábís, under the leadership of Mullá Ḥusayn-i-Buṣhrú'í, the Báb's most renowned disciple, set out from Khurasan toward Mazandaran, where they became involved in the conflict of Shaykh Ṭabarsí. In 1850, two other Bábí-state clashes occurred, in which more than two thousand Bábís lost their lives. In July of that same year the Báb

was publicly executed. In August 1852, a group of Bábís made an abortive attempt on the life of the shah. Simultaneously, Mírzá Yaḥyá Azal, regarded by many of the Bábís as their new leader, tried to stage a revolt in Mazandaran, which also failed. In the aftermath of these attempts, the remaining Bábí leadership was almost entirely wiped out. Azal's elder half-brother, Mírzá Ḥusayn-‘Alí-i-Núrí Bahá’u’lláh, who was among those imprisoned after the assassination attempt, was spared execution, but exiled to Iraq. In 1853, another Bábí-state clash occurred, in which some two hundred and fifty Bábís lost their lives. In about 1866, Bahá’u’lláh openly claimed to be “He whom God shall make manifest” (*man yuzḥiruhu’lláh*), the messianic figure of the Bábí religion. The majority of the Bábís came to accept His claim. Bahá’u’lláh 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 Bábí movement constitutes a unique phenomenon in recent Iranian history. The Bábí-state clashes and the attempt on the life of the shah made a lasting impact on the monarch and the public at large. Náṣiri’-d-Dín Sháh remained alert to a perceived Bábí threat, and throughout the Qájár period alleged Bábí involvement provided a convenient means for countering calls for reform. During the Constitutional Revolution, the contending parties would use the accusation of Bábí links to discredit and rally support against each other. The suppression of the Bábí movement brought the ulama temporarily closer to the state and strengthened their position vis-à-vis the Qájár 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 Bahá’í movement. The Bábí movement's revolutionary character was primarily owing to its radical break with the religious past.

THE BÁBÍS, THE STATE, AND THE ULAMA

The writings of the Báb reflect His view of temporal power. The legitimacy of Muḥammad Sháh's rule, it is implied, is dependent on his accepting the Báb's claim. In the *Qayyúmu'l-Asmá'*, the earliest work written following the announcement of His claim, the Báb 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 jihad in order to bring people into His faith. The Báb also addressed several letters to the shah and requested an audience with him, but to no avail. In His letters, the Báb warned the shah of the punishment that awaited him if he did not change his attitude toward the Báb, and at the same time disclaimed any material interests. Toward the end of Muḥammad Sháh's reign, the tone of the Báb's letters to him, and especially to his premier, Ḥájí Mírzá Áqásí, became more severe. It was the premier who had control over the affairs of the kingdom.

Ḥájí Mírzá Áqásí had apparently early on seen in the Báb a threat to his position. Muḥammad Sháh's mystical leanings tied him closely to Áqásí, who was his former tutor and acted as his spiritual guide. The Báb 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, Áqásí persuaded the shah not to grant the Báb an interview, and instead to order His banishment to the fortress of Mákú in Azerbaijan. As the Bábí movement spread, and the opposition of the clergy mounted, the government complied to a greater extent with their wishes. Following the assassination of Baraghání, his heirs and other clerics forced the government to imprison several Bábís, a few of whom, although apparently innocent, were subsequently killed. On this occasion the state failed to shield the Bábís, though it did not voluntarily engage in persecuting them.

The clergy had an obvious interest in involving the authorities in the persecution of the Bábís. In the period prior to the Mazandaran conflict, the clergy more than once had called on the authorities to suppress the Bábí movement, which they regarded as a heresy that threatened the

foundations of the religion. They also ascribed subversive intentions to the Bábís. The Báb 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 Báb and His followers challenged the shah and the authorities to summon them and the ulama to a meeting where the “truth” could be established.

The Báb’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 Báb in fact been acknowledged as the Hidden Imam, the function of the ulama would have ceased to exist” (Algar 148). Apart from this, the Báb did not fulfill the expectations of the ulama about the Mahdi’s appearance. As for the state authorities, even though the Báb did not make any claims to the throne, His claim to mahdihood could be perceived as a challenge, since in the context of *Shí‘í* theology the promised Mahdi was the ultimate source of power, whether religious or secular. On this basis, it has been argued that the Bábís’ belief that the Báb 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 Bábí movement, it “moved systematically and implacably to destroy it” (Walbridge 359). 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 Báb’s claim to mahdihood seriously. The young crown prince, Násiri’-Dín Mírzá, in his report to Muḥammad Sháh about the interrogation, simply ridicules the claim voiced by the Báb during the proceedings.³ The campaign against the Bábís at Shaykh Ṭabarsí 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 Báb’s claims and His and the Bábís’ objectives. It seems that the dominant view was that the Báb 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 Báb, the view that the Bábís 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 Bábís at Shaykh Ṭabarsí, "It is supposed their true object is not in any way relative to religion, but to create a revolutionary movement against the Government."⁴

Though the authorities failed to notice the implications of the Báb's claim to mahdihood, it nevertheless worsened an already tense situation. There had been sporadic cases of persecution of the Bábís prior to April 1848. Such incidents seem to have occurred more frequently, as the clergy, infuriated by the open challenge of the Báb and encouraged by the punishment imposed on Him, stepped up its attempts to incite the authorities and the populace to persecute the Bábís. An early account by Dr. Austin Wright, an American missionary stationed near Chihriq, where the Báb was held in confinement, states that "fierce quarrels" had already taken place between the Bábís and "the so-called orthodox party," when, following the bastinado inflicted on the Báb, the government issued orders that the Bábís "should be arrested wherever they were found and punished with fines and beatings" (qtd. in Momen, *Bábí and Bahá'í Religions* 73). The Báb'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 mahdihood. 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 Bábís after the conclave in Badasht should be viewed in this light.

In Mashhad, following a fight between a young Bábí and a servant of one of the local religious leaders, the Bábí involved was beaten and dragged through the streets by a string through his nose. About seventy Bábís, armed with swords, attempted to rescue him, and in the clashes that occurred a few of the townspeople and Bábís were injured.⁵ It was this episode that led to Mullá Ḥusayn's expulsion from Mashhad, upon which he set out on his march to Mazandaran. In Badasht, Qurratu'l-'Ayn Ṭáhirih, the only woman among the Letters of the Living, appeared unveiled in a gathering of Bábís, signaling the abrogation of Islamic law, and the commencement of the *qiyámat* (resurrection). On hearing the

news that the Bábís had discarded the *sharí'at*, and rumors of immoral acts committed, the inhabitants of Níyálá, a village in Mazandaran, attacked the Bábís who had arrived there from Badash̄t, killed and injured some, and plundered their belongings.⁶

It was shortly after these events that Muḥammad Sháh died, and with the accession of Nāṣiri'd-Dín Mírzá, power fell into the hands of the new premier, Mírzá Taqí Khán, entitled Amír-Kabír. This radically changed conditions for the Bábís, as he gave high priority to exterminating them. Amír-Kabír was a secularist reformer, determined to achieve his aims at any cost. He apparently regarded the Bábí movement as religious in nature and not political, but saw it as a threat to public order. When Muḥammad Sháh finally succumbed to his illness, the country was already in a state of turmoil. Gross mismanagement in the later years of Áqásí'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, Amír-Kabír needed to restore order in the country. Such concerns seem to have motivated Amír-Kabír's determination to crush the Bábís. His alarm about the swift spread of the Bábí movement is reflected in a contemporary report by Prince Dolgorukov, the Russian minister in Tehran. On 7 March 1849, at the height of the Mazandaran upheaval, Dolgorukov wrote,

However, no matter how serious this question may be [that is, the success of Sálár's rebellion in Khurasan], it has not preoccupied society to the same extent ever since the sectaries 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. (19)

Commenting later on Amír-Kabír's harsh policy toward the Bábís, Ferrier,

the French agent, wrote in a report dated 25 July 1850, "The Amír 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" (qtd. in Momen, *Bábí and Bahá'í Religions* 71).

THE QÍYÁMAT: A BÁBÍ PERSPECTIVE

A discussion of the background of the Shaykh Ṭabarsí episode would not be complete without reference to the expectations of the Bábís regarding the events associated with the Mahdi's appearance. Their views, like those of the populace, were shaped by Shí'í 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 Báb's claim to *bábíyyat* (gatehood) was linked to the imminent advent of the Mahdi himself, which implied the beginning of the final jihad. The *Qayyúmu'l-Asmá'* contains many references to *qítál* (battle), keeping the Bábís alert to a coming struggle. According to the traditions, the Mahdi would begin his *khurúj* (insurrection, literally "coming out") from Mecca. When the Báb instructed His followers to go to the Shí'í shrine cities in Iraq (the 'Atabát), where He would meet them after His pilgrimage to Mecca, many thought that the *khurúj* was to begin there. As it happened, however, the Báb failed to appear at the 'Atabát. The activities of his emissary to the 'Atabát had created tensions in the area (Momen, "Trial" 116–18). With thousands of pilgrims in Karbala, it was likely that the appearance of a large number of Bábís would have resulted in a confrontation with the local population and the pilgrims. The Báb later said that it was because of the disbelief of the ulama and to avoid "strife" that He changed His plans and did not appear at the 'Atabát (qtd. in Afnan 184). After this sudden change of plans, termed *badá'* (change in the divine will), the expected struggle appeared to have been postponed to an unspecified future. The Báb also referred to *qítál* occasionally in His later writings, and there is evidence of Bábí armament in Khurasan and Qazvin, apparently in preparation for the expected battle. It is even reported that the Báb had alluded to the Shaykh Ṭabarsí episode one or two months before it began.⁷

Certain factors created uncertainty in the Bábís' expectations about future events. Apart from the possibility of *badá'*, allegorical reading of the eschatological traditions left room for different interpretations. There are also many contradictory traditions. Rather than depicting the Mahdí's victory over his enemies, some traditions refer to his martyrdom and the humiliation and martyrdom of his companions (Amanat 196). The Báb and His followers were aware of these traditions, and in their writings referred to them.⁸ The Báb had hinted at His own martyrdom in some of His writings and in conversation with His followers. According to some sources, He had anticipated Mullá Ḥusayn-i-Buṣhrú'í's martyrdom and had informed him of it. Ḥájí Mullá Muḥammad-'Alí-i-Bárfurúshí, later called Quddús, the Báb's foremost disciple, is likewise reported to have predicted Mullá Ḥusayn's martyrdom a few years before the Mazandaran episode.⁹ Probably only a few understood their hints at the time. Yet these reports indicate that the Bábí leadership anticipated trials ahead.

As the confinement of their leader continued, and tensions surrounding them grew, the Bábís were increasingly compelled to revise their views about a decisive victory followed by the reign of the Mahdi. The Báb and the Bábí leaders addressed such issues in their writings. In His *Dalá'il-i-sab'ih*, written in 1847, the Báb rejects the idea that the *faraj* (deliverance) of the Mahdi implies sovereignty, an army, and a kingdom (33).¹⁰ Likewise, the Báb's amanuensis, Áqá Siyyid Ḥusayn-i-Kátib, in a letter to one of the Báb's uncles, comments on the common understanding of the *faraj*. He states that its true meaning is the revelation of verses (*nuzúl-i-áyát*), and not "the ascension on the throne of sovereignty (*salṭanat*) or other vain imaginings current among people" (Afnan 320).¹¹ It is quite plausible that by the time the Mazandaran episode began, the belief among the generality of the Bábís that the Mahdi would establish his temporal rule through the power of his sword had been shaken.

AN OUTLINE OF THE CONFLICT AT SHAYKH ṬABARSÍ

The *Shaykh Ṭabarsí* episode lasted from September 1848 to May 1849.

The prelude to the conflict was the march of a group of Bábís led by Mullá Ḥusayn-i-Buṣhrú'í from Khurasan to Mazandaran (July–September 1848). Initially, the band numbered about two hundred, some of whom were armed. On 12 *Shavvál* 1264/11 September 1848, the party reached Bārfurúsh, the chief commercial town in Mazandaran.¹² Muḥammad Sháh had died just shortly before that (4 September). On their arrival, the Bábís were met by a mob of three to four thousand townspeople and villagers who refused to let them enter the town. Mullá Ḥusayn instructed the Bábís 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 Bábís 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 Bábís. The attacks stopped with the arrival of 'Abbás-Qulí Khán-i-Lárijání, a prominent Mazandarani chief (*sarkardih*), and it was agreed that the Bábís should leave the area.

When the Bábís left Bārfurúsh, a crowd of townspeople followed them, and Khusraw-i-Qádí-Kalá'í, a tribal brigand, forcibly joined the Bábís with his armed men, ostensibly to protect them. Khusraw, whose intent was actually to loot the Bábís, led them around the countryside while his men and other local people began secretly killing them off. When the Bábís discovered this, they killed Khusraw, drove off his men, and took refuge in the nearby shrine of Shaykh Ṭabarsí (22 *Shavvál* 1264/21 September 1848) (Luṭf-'Alí Mírzá 52–53). 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 Ṭabarsí years later, wrote that it was “a place of little natural strength” (*A Year* 617). The site was not chosen for strategic reasons. As the Bábís expected to be attacked, they built four small towers around the shrine, from which they kept watch over the area. Quddús and others joined the Bábís, and their number rose to about five hundred.

When Náṣiri'd-Dín Sháh heard that the Bábís were entrenched at Shaykh Ṭabarsí, he gave orders to the chiefs of Mazandaran to wipe them out.¹³ A number of local chiefs soon arrived with a militia nearly four

thousand strong. On 25 Muḥarram/22 December, the Bábís 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.¹⁴ This was of great importance to the Bábís as their own equipment was completely inadequate. On their arrival at Shaykh Ṭabarsí, the Bábís had probably many swords and daggers, but only seven muskets, and perhaps five horses (Luṭf-‘Alí Mírzá 43–44, 75).

After this defeat, the shah gave emphatic orders to his uncle, Prince Mihdí-Qulí Mírzá, the newly appointed governor of Mazandaran, to eradicate the Bábís. His edict, dated 3 Šafar 1265/30 December 1848, referred to the Bábí movement as a “fresh heresy” (*bid‘at*), the extermination of which was required by the religion and Shí‘í 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 Shí‘í doctrine hangs in the balance.”¹⁵ The edict reveals a significant measure of religious motivation on the part of the young shah for the suppression of the Bábís.

Sometime during the first half of January 1849, the prince-governor arrived at a village near Shaykh Ṭabarsí. He did not launch an attack immediately, as he was waiting for reinforcements. The Bábís had started digging a ditch around the shrine on 1 Šafar 1265/28 December 1848 and were building a fort. They also began storing provisions in preparation for a siege. When the Bábís discovered that the prince was waiting for ‘Abbás-Qulí Khán-i-Láríjání and his forces, they decided to strike first. On the night of 29 Šafar 1265 (the night of 24–25 January 1849), some two hundred Bábís sortied from their fortifications and routed the government forces (Luṭf-‘Alí Mírzá 91).

Three days later, ‘Abbás-Qulí Khán arrived with his forces, whose number gradually rose to about six thousand.¹⁶ On the night of 9 Rabí‘u’l-Avval 1265 (the night of 2–3 February 1849) over two hundred Bábís attacked ‘Abbás-Qulí Khán’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 Bábís’ attack. This time the Bábís

suffered many casualties. More than forty of them, including Mullá Husayn-i-Bushrú'í, 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 Bábís went out to the battlefield to fetch their own dead. They found that the Bábí corpses had been decapitated, burned, or both. On seeing this, the Bábís exhumed and decapitated the bodies of the soldiers, and mounted their heads on poles near the fort.¹⁷

Soon the prince-governor returned with a new army, and 'Abbás-Qulí Khán joined forces with him, the number of troops and irregulars totaling ten to twelve thousand.¹⁸ 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 Ṭabarsí, and a heavy bombardment of the fort began in the second half of March.

By early April the Bábís 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 'Abbás-Qulí Khán and the Mazandarani chiefs had failed to capture the fort in spite of their superior forces, the government in Tehran dispatched Sulaymán Khán-i-Afshár (about 9 April).¹⁹ Under Sulaymán Khán'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 Bábís 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 discovered that the Bábís 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 Bábís were promised safety if they left the fort. Copies of the Qur'án were sealed and sent to confirm the pledge. On the afternoon of 15 Jamádíyu'th-Thání 1265/9 May 1849, the surviving Bábís, some 220 in number, evacuated the fort. Once outside, they were disarmed and massacred (10 May 1849).²⁰

AN ANALYSIS OF THE NATURE OF THE BÁBÍ MOVEMENT

The Bábí clashes with the state have often been portrayed as uprisings against Qájár rule. In his 1939 thesis, M. S. Ivanov proposed that the Bábí movement was “a popular mass movement . . . directed against the ruling class” (Minorsky 878). 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. According to his study, the Bábí movement was initially a religious reform movement, which sought converts among urban elites. However, when the Bábís 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 Bábís 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.²¹ In the case of Shaykh Ṭabarsí, of some 360 identified Bábí participants, the occupational background of about 220 is known. Of these, more than sixty percent belonged to the ulama class, while craftsmen, skilled and unskilled urban workers, and peasants together accounted for some twenty-five percent.²² 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 Bábís at Shaykh Ṭabarsí 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 Shahmírzád, it was the acceptance by one of their

ulama of the religious claims of the Bábís, which he had been appointed to investigate, that prompted the villagers to go to Shaykh Ṭabarsí. In general, the picture that emerges from the eyewitness accounts of the Shaykh Ṭabarsí conflict does not reveal a radical social outlook on the part of the Bábís, but rather their deep religious concerns.

Browne and other scholars, such as Algar and MacEoin, propose interpretations of the Bábí-state clashes that emphasize the religious, as opposed to the socioeconomic, grounds for the conflict. According to Browne, the Bábís aimed to replace Qájár rule with a Bábí theocracy in the immediate future, and to establish a reign of the saints.²³ Algar sees the Bábí movement as a heresy of Shí'í origin that sought to overthrow orthodoxy by force. He writes that the Bábí rebellion began with the march of Mullá Ḥusayn and his party toward Mazandaran, but this "fact was obscured by the death of Muḥammad Sháh, and the Bábí revolt became one element in the chaos surrounding the succession" (144). More recently, MacEoin has expressed the view that "[b]etween 1847 and 1850, following the Báb's announcement that he himself was the Qá'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" ("From Babism" 222). Like Browne, MacEoin states that the Bábís intended to establish a "Bábí theocracy" ("Bahá'í Fundamentalism" 70) and "the immediate rule of the saints on earth" ("From Babism" 222). He links the clashes between the Bábís and the state to the Bábí concept of an "offensive" jihad ("Babism" 3:316), but maintains that at Shaykh Ṭabarsí and elsewhere, the Bábís proclaimed a "defensive" jihad against the Qájár state and its forces. MacEoin suggests that the Bábís attempted unsuccessfully to transform these local upheavals into "a more widely-based revolutionary struggle against the forces of unbelief" ("Babi Concept" 121), and he gives a number of factors for their failure.²⁴

The theme of jihad is treated extensively in the early writings of the Báb. In different passages of the *Qayyúmu'l-Asmá'*, warfare is conditioned on God's leave and on the command of the Báb and of the Imam, and the believers are instructed to purchase arms in expectation of a struggle. The concept of jihad in this work and others written before the Persian

Bayán resembles the Shí‘í concept of jihad (MacEoin “Babi Concept” 107). There are also references to, and regulations regarding, jihad in some later writings by the Báb, including the Bayán, written in late 1847. The concept of jihad in these writings clearly centers round the authority of a Bábí king. For instance, the Bayán instructs the Bábí 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 Bayán regarding nonbelievers. However, there is an instruction that gentleness, not violence, should be used in persuasion.²⁵

References to Bábí kings in the Persian Bayán seem to anticipate the appearance of some form of a Bábí state (or states). The laws of the Bayán regarding holy war, however, are given as instructions to Bábí kings, implying that a Bábí king must be in power before offensive jihad can be carried out. There are no provisions here for rank-and-file Bábís to declare offensive jihad without a Bábí king. Neither are there provisions for the Bábís to wage a jihad in order to put a Bábí king into power. In the *Dalá‘il-i-sab‘ih*, the Báb 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 Bábís 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 (42–43). The argument that the Bábís wanted to establish a “Bábí theocracy” through a “holy war” is primarily based on references to Bábí kings in the Báb’s “later” writings (MacEoin “Bahá‘í Fundamentalism” 70). However, these same writings, in effect, precluded the possibility of waging an offensive jihad, as only a Bábí king could conduct an offensive jihad, and such a king did not exist.

It is commonly acknowledged that a Bábí offensive jihad was never declared. In MacEoin’s treatment of the subject, there is a tension between the Bábí concept of offensive jihad, as he interprets it, and the actual defensive warfare of the Bábís. He tries to resolve this tension by suggesting that offensive jihad 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 Bábís” (“Babi Concept” 121). Again, considering the way the concept of jihad is developed in the Báb’s later writings, it seems more likely that the issue never arose.

The above discussion about the implications of the concept of jihad in the writings of the Báb does not consider the extent to which the Bábís were acquainted with these texts, or how they interpreted them. While the regulations about jihad and the severe laws formulated by the Báb are relevant to the Bábí-state conflicts to the extent that they influenced the actions of the Bábís or provoked reactions from the ulama and the state, they cannot by themselves explain the Bábís’ motives. To address this question, it is essential to investigate the course of the events and circumstances of the Bábí-state clashes as well as the Bábí actors’ understanding of those events. Such an analysis will provide insight into whether or not the Bábís were intent on insurrection or establishing a Bábí theocracy by means of holy war. In the next section, the events and circumstances around the Bábís’ march to Mazandaran and their entrenchment at Shaykh Ṭabarsí will be analyzed to establish the context in which the Bábís’ actions took place and to find possible explanations for them. The Bábís’ understanding of their situation and their actions will also be studied, as this is crucial in clarifying their objectives. In this analysis, the three Bábí and Bahá’í accounts by survivors of the event, Luṭf-‘Alí Mírzáy-i-Shírání, Mír Abú-Ṭálib-i-Shahmírzádí, and Hájí Naṣír-i-Qazvíní, are particularly relevant. Of these three, Luṭf-‘Alí Mírzá’s account is the earliest and most important. The history by Mahjúr-i-Zavári’í and the *Nuṣṣatu’-Káf* are also significant, since they predate the final Bahá’í-Azalí break of the 1860s.

THE OBJECTIVES OF THE BÁBÍS AT SHAYKH ṬABARSÍ

In his narrative, Nabíl refers to the raising of the black standard by the group of Bábís as they embarked on their march to Mazandaran. This issue has attracted the attention of various scholars. In the Shí’í prophetic traditions, there are references to black standards proceeding from

Khurasan, which signify the advent of the Mahdi. According to Nabíl, Mullá Ḥusayn unfurled the “Black Standard” on the Báb’s instruction as he set out toward Mazandaran. Nabíl 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 Ṭabarsí*” (324–25, 351), where it was flown until the fall of the fort. Commenting on Nabíl’s statements, various scholars have drawn attention to the significance of the raising of black standards.²⁶ It is argued that apart from its messianic overtones, fulfilling literally the prophecies about the appearance of the Qá’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 Bábís, and 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 Qájár 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 *chávush-khání*.²⁷

The practice of *chávush-khání* (recitation by a *chávush* or guide) was common at the time and was associated with pilgrimage. The *chávush* 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 ‘Atabát, or Mashhad. He would hoist a special banner to announce the imminent pilgrimage (Yúsufí 5:101–2). Luṭf-‘Alí Mírzá’s account indicates that the Bábís were apprehensive about being attacked, and attempted to conceal their identity by claiming to be pilgrims on their way to Karbala (2–4, 8–9). Considering the practice of *chávush-khání*, it would seem that Mullá Ḥusayn’s party could have flown a black banner without necessarily arousing suspicion. However, there is evidence suggesting that Nabíl’s portrayal of this event is not entirely correct.

The earlier accounts do not mention any such episode. In fact, Luṭf-‘Alí Mírzá’s account contains evidence that makes it seem rather doubtful. Luṭf-‘Alí Mírzá had joined Mullá Ḥusayn’s band shortly before their

entry into Mazandaran. He comments in passing on Mullá Ḥusayn's black garment, saying that this was the meaning of the black standard from Khurasan reported in the tradition (19). This suggests that the travelers were not flying black standards at all at that time. There is corroboratory evidence in the account by Mír Abú-Ṭálib-i-Shahmírzádí, who joined the Bábís after they entered the shrine of Shaykh Ṭabarsí. He refers several times in his narrative to the prophecies about the black standards having been fulfilled. However, he implies that the Bábís "understood Mullá Ḥusayn to be the Standards from Khurásán" (37).²⁸ The *Nuqtatu'l-Káf*, too, contains references to the various standards in the prophecies. It is stated that the "Khurásání Standard" refers to "jináb-i-Siyyidu'sh-Shuhadá, who set out from Khurásán (Mullá Ḥusayn-i-Bushrú'í)" (Browne, *Nuqtatu'l-Káf* 153). Considering this evidence, it seems likely that the Bábís 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 was the act of Mullá Ḥusayn and his party, who set out on a march from Khurasan, which was viewed as the fulfillment of the prophecies.

Elsewhere in his narrative (354), Nabil gives the number of the Bábís at Shaykh Ṭabarsí as 313. Like the black standard, the figure 313 has eschatological significance. According to certain traditions, the companions of the Mahdí number 313, which is the numerical value of the word *jaysh* (army), that is, the *jaysh* of the Mahdí.²⁹ It is not unlikely that an emphasis on the literal fulfillment of such prophecies led to the circulation among the Bábís of stories about the carrying of the black standard and the number of participants at Shaykh Ṭabarsí being exactly 313, which subsequently found their way into Nabil's narrative.

Evidence as to why Mullá Ḥusayn and a large number of Bábís were heading for Mazandaran is scanty. Mullá Ḥusayn had just been ordered to leave Mashhad. The region was unstable due to a prolonged state of rebellion, and conflicts between the Bábís and the local people would have worsened the situation. Mullá Ḥusayn reportedly once remarked that his purpose in leaving Mashhad had been to "exalt the word of God" (Luṭf-'Alí Mírzá 18).³⁰ 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 Báb could be rescued from prison. Ávárih, the author of a late Bahá'í history, states that it was decided there that the Bábís should go to the prison fortress in Azerbaijan, and once there ask Muḥammad Sháh to release the Báb, or liberate him by force if necessary, avoiding conflict as far as possible.³¹ According to Shaykh Kázim-i-Samandar, Mullá Ḥusayn's party intended to proceed to Azerbaijan to meet the Báb ('Alá'í 168). 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 Qájár chroniclers, only Hidáyat states that Mullá Ḥusayn's original intention was to go to Chihriq to liberate the Báb.³² He also writes that the Bábís intended to begin the *khurúj*.

The existing sources do not clarify the Báb's attitude towards His followers' plan to rescue Him. Some sources report that while on His way to the prison fortress of Mákú, the Báb sent a message to a certain Sulaymán Khán-i-Afshár-i-Şá'in-Qal'í, asking for assistance. A group of Bábís, being informed of this, offered to rescue the Báb, but He declined their request.³³ Sulaymán Khán had been an admirer of the late head of the Shaykhí school, from which the majority of the early Bábís were recruited. He was known for his wealth, and may have been in a position to arrange for the rescue of the Báb. However, it seems that in this case, the Báb's message was meant as a challenge to him.

The rescue of the Báb, if carried out by force, would amount to interfering in the affairs of the authorities. Apparently, the Bábís regarded such an act as legitimate, as it was in response to persecution. It is difficult to conjecture the course of action that the Bábís would have taken had they succeeded in rescuing the Báb. Nowhere in the available Bábí or Bahá'í accounts is there any clear indication of their future plans. The only clue given is that they intended to go to the Shí'í shrine cities of Iraq.³⁴ If this is taken at face value, it could suggest that the Bábís intended to leave the country. However, considering the fate of the Báb's emissary to the 'Atabát,³⁵ it is hard to imagine that they would have fared any better there, in the heartland of the Shí'í world, than in Iran.

It is important to have a sense of the context in which the Bábís' march

to Mazandaran took place. As mentioned earlier, according to Wright, the government issued orders for the persecution of the Bábís at about this time. This is corroborated by Luṭf-'Alí Mírzá's account. He writes that, entering Mazandaran, the Bábís encountered the party of Prince Khánlar Mírzá, the new governor of the province. When the prince discovered that they were Bábís, he said to several of them: "You are all Bábís and *mufsid-i-fi'l-ard*" (literally, "the corrupt upon the land," from the Qur'án 18:94), and killing you is obligatory, and the shah [Muḥammad Sháh] has ordered that wherever they find you, they kill you" (Luṭf-'Alí Mírzá 14). Other sources do not refer to Muḥammad Sháh giving orders for killing the Bábís. Still, the incident reflects the tension that surrounded the Bábís at the time. Previously, on Luṭf-'Alí Mírzá's advice, Mullá Ḥusayn had instructed the Bábís to stand guard at night.

When the Bábís, near Bárfurúsh, received news of the death of Muḥammad Sháh, they headed toward the town. The Bábís must have been aware that trouble could break out there due to the presence of Sa'ídu'l-'Ulamá', an influential cleric who was hostile toward the Bábís. However, it appears that they had no alternative. Shortly before this, they had been forced to leave the village of Arím because of complaints of some of the local people who had objected to the Bábís occupying their pastureland; others had said that foodstuffs had become scarce because the Bábís paid so well that everybody went to them to sell their rice. The people of Arím had threatened to attack the Bábís if they did not leave (Luṭf-'Alí Mírzá 20–21). Muḥammad Sháh's death complicated this situation radically. The Bábís 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.³⁶ A letter, written from the provincial capital Sári shortly after Muḥammad Sháh's death, reads: ". . . Saree [Sári] . . . is the only town not in a disturbed state in all Mazandaran, and the roads are infested by robbers in every direction."³⁷ Bárfurúsh was the major town most easily accessible from Arím. Here, the Bábís would be able to find provisions sufficient for their numbers until the situation stabilized.

Describing the Bábís' entry into Bárfurúsh, neither of the two main

official histories of the period states that the Bábís were attacked. Luṭf-‘Alí Mírzá’s eyewitness account clearly states that they were, as do other Bábí and later Bahá’í sources, and Shaykh’l-‘Ajam’s account seems to confirm this. The latter writes that news reached Bárfurúsh that five hundred Bábís had rebelled and were intent on making a surprise attack. The people of Bárfurúsh armed themselves and waited for the Bábís in order to kill them. When the Bábís arrived, a clash occurred, during which Mullá Ḥusayn killed seven or eight people (Dorn 206–7). There may have been more casualties among the townspeople in this first clash. Nevertheless, they were relatively few, and this suggests that the Bábís had not intended to attack the inhabitants. When Mullá Ḥusayn and his fellow Bábís made sorties on the besieging troops at Shaykh Ṭabarsí, they proved capable of imposing significant casualties on their enemies.

After leaving Bárfurúsh, the Bábís reluctantly agreed that Khusraw-i-Qádí-Kalá’í and his armed men should escort them. The Bábís were followed by a vengeful mob from Bárfurúsh, and they were strangers to the inhospitable surroundings of Mazandaran, with its narrow paths, thick forests, and impassable marshland. When the Bábís 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 Bábís pursued the escort and attacked a village, which they thought was Qádí-Kalá. On returning, the Bábís discovered that none of their possessions were left. Then the Bábís made their way, with the help of a local guide whom they had taken prisoner, to the nearby shrine of Shaykh Ṭabarsí.

The Bábís decided to stay at Shaykh Ṭabarsí because they could not move on. The Bábí survivors’ accounts show that the party’s leader, Mullá Ḥusayn, 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 (Luṭf-‘Alí Mírzá 54). Luṭf-‘Alí Mírzá describes the agony of the Bábís when they heard that there was no escape from “martyrdom.” After Muḥammad Shah’s death, it was no longer possible for them to proceed with their initial plan of rescuing the Báb. Apart from the general lawlessness in the region and the risk of being attacked

by robbers, the Bábís' enemies wanted to avenge the blood of those killed in Bárfurúsh, as well as that of Khusraw and his men. The Bábís 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.³⁸ Hájí Naṣír's account indicates that the Bábís expected the townspeople to attack ('Alá'í 504). It seems that word had also been sent to nearby villages that the Bábís were infidels, whom it was lawful to kill and plunder (Luṭf-'Alí Mírzá 36). For a time after the Bábís entered the shrine of Shaykh Ṭabarsí, the people from Qádí-Kalá and other villages robbed all the strangers in the area and even killed a few (Abú-Ṭálib 3). In short, the Bábís were trapped, so they began erecting some rudimentary defenses around the shrine. The fact that the first major attack on the Bábís 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.³⁹ In the meantime the inhabitants of Qádí-Kalá attacked the Bábís at the shrine.⁴⁰

Under these circumstances, the motifs of jihad and martyrdom emerged fully. The Bábís, like the general Shí'í population of Iran, were well acquainted with these motifs. To them, the advent of the Mahdi marked the culmination of Shí'í history. As the struggle began, it appeared to the Bábís that the episode of Karbala was being reenacted. For them, the Qájárs 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 Muḥarram, the very month in which the Imám Ḥusayn was martyred. Mullá Ḥusayn referred specifically to this in his interview with the prince's emissary and drew a parallel to the Umayyads and the Imám Ḥusayn.⁴¹

Certain factors indicate that the Bábís 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.⁴² If the actions of the Bábís at Shaykh Ṭabarsí were part of a Bábí 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 Sálár, 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 Ṭabarsí was obviously only a matter of time.⁴³ Therefore, preparing for defensive warfare at Shaykh Ṭabarsí would not serve any end in itself if the other Bábís 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. Mullá Muḥammad-‘Alí-i-Zanjání Ḥujjat, who was to lead the Bábís of his town in the most severe of the Bábí-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 Zanzan and had been in contact with them during his confinement in Tehran. The first major attack on Shaykh Ṭabarsí 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 Zanzani Bábís would have had sufficient time to organize a revolt there, had they been instructed to do so. Another Bábí leader, Áqá Siyyid Yaḥyáy-i-Dárábí Vahíd, who two years later would be involved in the first Nayríz 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 Ḥujjat nor Vahíd, however, nor any of the other Bábís, attempted to organize a revolt. In spite of His imprisonment, the Báb was in communication with His followers, and while at one point He may have instructed them to join the Bábís at Shaykh Ṭabarsí, He never issued an order for a Bábí offensive jihad.

The early Bábí and later Bahá'í narratives of the episode do not indicate that the participants at Shaykh Ṭabarsí aspired to establish a Bábí theocracy. The claim of the court historian Sipíhr that Mullá Ḥusayn promised his fellow Bábís kingship and rulership of various lands (3:1019) stands in sharp contrast to the statements in these accounts that Mullá Ḥusayn, 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” (Luṭf-‘Alí Mírzá 18–19).⁴⁴

The eyewitness accounts show that the Bábís 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 Bábís and the prince-governor. According to Luṭf-‘Alí Mírzá, the prince sent a strongly worded message to Mullá Ḥusayn, accusing the Bábís of stirring up mischief. The message also said that the Bábís were no match for the imperial troops and that they should leave the province. Luṭf-‘Alí Mírzá then gives a summary of Mullá Ḥusayn’s exchange with the prince’s emissary. The emissary remarked that the Bábís 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 Náṣiri’-d-Dín Sháh.⁴⁵ Mullá Ḥusayn 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 ulama to engage in logical arguments with the Bábís. If the ulama defeated the Bábís in argument, they could kill them; otherwise, the ulama should accept the cause of truth.⁴⁶ The interview was interrupted when Mullá Ḥusayn went to get Quddús’s response to the prince’s message. On returning, Mullá Ḥusayn angrily related to the emissary what the Bábís had suffered, saying that it was their enemies, and not the Bábís, who had caused mischief. To the prince’s remark about the superiority of the royal troops, Mullá Ḥusayn answered that truth always prevailed over falsehood, and that if the whole world united to assail them, he would wage jihad against it, until he either was martyred or defeated his adversaries (Luṭf-‘Alí Mírzá 85–88).

In response to the prince’s remark about joining forces in order to overthrow the shah, Mullá Ḥusayn 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 Bábís, 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 province, saying, “I shall make manifest the cause of God by means of the sword,” and added that he had been deceived in Bárfurúsh by the “sardár,” that is, ‘Abbás-Qulí Khán-i-Lárijání, 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. Mullá Ḥusayn 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 (Luṭf-‘Alí Mírzá 88–89). Obviously, the Bábís were not begging for mercy. Mullá Ḥusayn’s reference to ‘Abbás-Qulí Khán 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 Bábís out of the fort so that they could be killed more easily. Mullá Ḥusayn’s remarks, as related by Luṭf-‘Alí Mírzá, also clearly show the Bábís’ determination to disseminate their cause and to defend themselves. Mullá Ḥusayn’s boldness also suggests that if the Bábís at Shaykh Ṭabarsí really aimed to overthrow the shah, they would not have hesitated to say so.⁴⁷

Some of the sources mention a letter allegedly written by Quddús to the prince. According to the *Nuqtatu’l-Káf*, Quddús, in answer to the prince’s inquiry, said that their cause was religious and not worldly, and also wrote: “Náṣiri’-d-Dín Sháh 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” (Browne, *Nuqtatu’l-Káf* 163, 166).⁴⁸ The tone of this passage in the *Nuqtatu’l-Káf* agrees, to some extent, with the attitude of the Bábís at Shaykh Ṭabarsí depicted above. However, it is unlikely that the author(s) of the *Nuqtatu’l-Káf* would have had firsthand information about the contents of such a letter. The tone of this work reflects the antagonism that many Bábís had developed toward the authorities by the time it was written, that is, following the execution of the Báb and the death of a large number of Bábís in clashes with government forces. In the *Nuqtatu’l-Káf*, no effort is made to hide animosity toward the Qájárs. It does not seem justified to conclude on this basis, however, that the Bábís at Shaykh Ṭabarsí 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-Káf* toward the ruling class, it is significant that the text consistently maintains that the sovereignty referred to by Quddús was not a material one. It is stated, for instance, that 'Abbás-Qulí Khán had heard Quddús 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 'Abbás-Qulí Khán realized that this was not the case, he turned toward Násiri'd-Dín Sháh to achieve his ends. The text goes on to explain that Quddús had intended a spiritual sovereignty, and that the humility of the kings referred to would appear with the passage of time (162–63). 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 Báb and the Bábí 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 Bábís at Shaykh Ṭabarsí understood their situation and actions, the circumstances that forced them to stay and fight, the fact that other Bábís 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 Mullá Ḥusayn's party, all support the view that they were not intent on insurrection and that there was no such plan of a general Bábí insurrection. Mullá Ḥusayn and his companions knew that they were fighting a war they could not win. In their view, it was a defensive jihad that would be a testimony to the truth and power of the Bábí cause.

CONCLUSION

The Shaykh Ṭabarsí conflict was seen by contemporaries as the result of a Bábí revolt. When the Bábís 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 Násiri'd-Dín Sháh and the abortive attempt at rebellion in Mazandaran in 1852. Though scholars have differed on whether to emphasize socioeconomic or religious aspects of the Bábí-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 Ṭabarsí clash, as well as the Bábí 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 Bábís and the surrounding Muslim community, and a critical concurrence of events immediately before the conflict.

The Bábís' 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 Báb advanced claims to charismatic religious authority, the most radical ones being the claims to mahdihood and prophethood. Likewise, the Bábís 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 Ṭabarsí began only a few months after the Báb 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 Bábís had broken the *sharí'at*. The Bábís' determination to announce the coming of the Mahdi, the clergy's resolve to eradicate this heresy, and the escalating climate of hostility toward the Bábís were the background causes of the Shaykh Ṭabarsí conflict.

Against this background, certain crucial events coincided to precipitate the conflict. Mullá Ḥusayn-i-Buṣhrú'í and his fellow Bábís were on a march through Mazandaran in pursuance of their plan to rescue the Báb from prison when the country was thrown into chaos by the death of Muḥammad Shah. Under these circumstances, the Bábís were regarded as insurrectionists, though they were hardly outfitted for battle. The fact that

their fellow Bábís did not attempt to create uprisings when they had the opportunity indicates that there was no Bábí 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 Bábís. The Bábís, 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.

NOTES

This article was first published in *Iranian Studies*, volume 35, numbers 1–3, Winter/ Spring/Summer 2002. It is reprinted here by permission.

The present study is part of the author's MA thesis which he submitted to the University of Copenhagen in the summer of 2002.

1. For the Bábí movement in general, see Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*. With respect to the Mazandaran conflict, a good number of primary sources are available. The Bábí-Bahá'í sources include three eyewitness accounts, two narratives, as well as sections on the episode found in general histories of the Bábí and Bahá'í religions. Of the eyewitness accounts, Luṭf-'Alí Mírzáy-i-Shírází's untitled chronicle is the earliest and most extensive. The author was executed in 1852. His chronicle was therefore written within three years and three months of the conclusion of the Mazandaran episode. Mír Abú-Ṭálib-i-Shahmírzádí's untitled narrative was written much later, but before 1888. Hájí Naṣír-i-Qazvíní's eyewitness account ("Tárikh-i-jináb-i-Hájí Naṣír-i-shahíd," in 'Alá'í) is much shorter than the other two. He wrote his narrative not long before he died in prison in 1300/ 1882–83.

The "Vaqá'í-i-mímíyyih" by Siyyid Muḥammad-Ḥusayn-i-Zavári'í Mahjúr is an early account of the Shaykh Ṭabarsí conflict. Mahjúr seems to have written in 1278/1861–62. The account by Áqá Siyyid Muḥammad-Riḍá Shahmírzádí also contains some information about the Mazandaran conflict. He was the youngest brother of Mír Abú-Ṭálib-i-Shahmírzádí. His account seems to have been written, at least in part, in the 1890s. Of the general histories of the Bábí and Bahá'í religions, the *Kitáb-i-Nuqtatu'l-Káfi* is the earliest so far published. The *Tárikh-i-Jadíd* by Mírzá Ḥusayn-i-Hamadání adds almost no new information on the Mazandaran

conflict to what is available in the *Kitáb-i-Nuqtatu'l-Káf*. Nabil-i-Zarandí's narrative, completed in 1890, is much more extensive than the other two. The part dealing with Bábí history has been published in an edited and abridged English translation under the title *The Dawn-Breakers*.

The most important Muslim accounts of the clash are in the two main official histories of the period—Mírzá Muḥammad-Taqí Lisánu'l-Mulk Sipih, *Násikhū't-tavárikh*, and Ridá-Qulí Khán Hidáyat, *Rawdatu's-ṣafáy-i-Náṣirí*—as well as the brief account by a certain *Shaykhū'l-'Ajam*, “Min kalám-i-Shaykhī'l-'Ajam-i-Mázandarání” in B. Dorn, “Nachträge.” The *Násikhū't-tavárikh* and *Rawdatu's-ṣafáy-i-Náṣirí* record the history down to the year 1274/1857–58. The account by *Shaykhū'l-'Ajam* 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 *Bábí and Bahá'í Religions*. A number of reports by the Russian Minister in Tehran and one by the Russian consul in Astarábád are available in Dolgorukov, “Excerpts from Dispatches.” A document of singular importance is the edict of Náṣirí'd-Dín Sháh to the governor of Mazandaran, a facsimile of which is published in *The Bahá'í World* 5:58. Ruhu'llah Mehrabkhani gives an English translation of this edict in his *Mullá Husayn* (249–51).

2. Nabil 301. According to Nabil, the trial of the Báb 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 Áqá Siyyid Ḥusayn-i-Kátib and Khál-i-Aṣghar in Abu'l-Qasim Afnan 337–39.

3. A later report ascribed to Nizámu'l-'Ulamá', 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 Náṣirí'd-Dín Mírzá's report, see Browne, *Materials* 249–55. For the report ascribed to Nizámu'l-'Ulamá', see Hidáyat 10:423–28. See also Sipih 2: 909–13; and Browne, *Traveller's Narrative* 2:277–90, note M.

4. Dispatch of 30 January 1849, qtd. in Momen, *Bábí and Bahá'í Religions* 92.

5. Mahjúr 6–8. Abú-Ṭálib 23, 46–47; 'Alá'í 168; see also Nabil 288–89.

6. Nabil 298–300; Munírih Khánum 15–16.

7. Amanat 279; Fádil-i-Mázandarání 3:374; Browne, *Nuqtatu'l-Káf* 139; Áváríh 1:133.

8. See Báb, *Dalá'il-i-sab'ih* 47–48, and the treatise by Ibn-i-Karbalá'í, in Fádíl-i-Mázandarání 3:514, both written in 1263/1846–47, about a year before the Shaykh Ṭabarsí conflict.

9. Browne, *Nuqtatu'l-Káf* 139; Nabíl 262; Luṭf-'Alí Mírzá 118.

10. See also the Báb's letter to the ulama of Tabriz, qtd. in Afnan 334.

11. This letter was apparently written some time after Muḥammad Sháh's death.

12. Luṭf-'Alí Mírzá 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.

13. Sipíhr 3:1019; Hidáyat 10:433.

14. Sipíhr (3:1021) and Hidáyat (10:434) write that in this attack the Bábís massacred the people of the village where the militia of the Mazandarani chiefs had entrenched themselves. The Bábí and Bahá'í sources do not refer to any such massacre. Browne is obviously mistaken in stating that according to the author of the *Nuqtatu'l-Káf*, the Bábís, on this occasion, killed “the soldiers and villagers alike” (Hamadání 362). The *Nuqtatu'l-Káf*, 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 Bábís 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.

15. See *Bahá'í World* 5:58; Mehrabkhani 250–51.

16. Luṭf-'Alí Mírzá 99; Semino's letter of 16 June 1849, qtd. in Ettehadieh and Mir Mohammad Sadeq 192.

17. Luṭf-'Alí Mírzá 112; Abú-Ṭálib 16; 'Alá'í 510–11; Mahjúr 64–65; Browne, *Nuqtatu'l-Káf* 177; Sipíhr 3:1027; Hidáyat 10:439–40.

18. Luṭf-'Alí Mírzá, 119; 'Alá'í 515; Ferrier to de LaHitte, 21 February 1950, qtd. in Momen, *Bábí and Bahá'í Religions* 95.

19. It seems that 'Abbás-Qulí Khán was suspected of having become a Bábí. See Semino's letter of 16 June 1849 in Ettehadieh and Mir Mohammad Sadeq 192.

20. Abú-Ṭálib 21, 32–33, 36; see also Browne, *Nuqtatu'l-Káf* 192; Nabíl 399–400; Sipíhr 3:1035–36.

21. See Momen, "Social Basis." Momen has discussed Ivanov's analysis, but many of the points he raises apply equally to Greussing's article.
22. Smith and Momen 72; cf. Amanat 359.
23. *Materials* xv; Hamadání xvi.
24. Cf. MacEoin, "Babism" 316; "Bahá'í Fundamentalism" 70.
25. Báb, *Bayán* 158, 120, 63. For regulations of the Bayán concerning jihad and nonbelievers, see MacEoin, "Babi Concept" 108–109.
26. Momen, "Social Basis" 161; MacEoin, "Babi Concept" 115.
27. I am grateful to Mr. Saleh Molavinegad for drawing my attention to the practice of *chávush-khání*.
28. Cf. 9, 10, 11. Nabíl had access to a different manuscript of Mír Abú-Ṭálib's account. In his rendering of the passage in question, Mullá Ḥusayn is "the bearer" of the "Black Standard" (407).
29. See Amir-Moezzi 8:578.
30. Cf. 88.
31. 1:129. Áváríh erroneously writes Mákú instead of Chihríq. Probably due to the bastinado inflicted on the Báb, the Bábís determined to rescue their leader. See *Hidáyat* 10:428.
32. 10:422, 428–29; cf. Browne, *Traveller's Narrative* 2:189.
33. Nabíl 235–36; Fádíl-i-Mázandarání 3:75. MacEoin refers to this incident but confuses Sulaymán Khán-i-Afshár-i-Şá'in-Qal'í with Sulaymán Khán-i-Afshár, later entitled Şahib-Ikhtiyár, who, as he writes, was "one of the country's leading military men" ("Babi Concept" 106). It was this Sulaymán Khán who fought against the Bábís at Shaykh Tabarsí. For Şahib-Ikhtiyár, see *Bámdád* 2:116–18; for Sulaymán Khán-i-Şá'in-Qal'í, see Fádíl-i-Mázandarání 3:74–75.
34. Luṭf-'Alí Mírzá 88; cf. Browne, *Nuqtatu'l-Káf* 166; Sipíhr 3:1014; *Hidáyat* 10:431.
35. See Momen, "Trial."
36. Cf. 'Alá'í 504.
37. Anonymous letter dated 12 September 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. Luṭf-'Alí Mírzá 25–26.

38. Cf. Luṭf-'Alí Mírzá 61; Mahjúr 37.

39. Sipihr 3:1017; Hidáyat 10:433.

40. Browne, *Nuṭṭatu'l-Káf* 160; cf. Nabíl 345.

41. Luṭf-'Alí Mírzá 87; Mahjúr 42.

42. Cf. Luṭf-'Alí Mírzá 43–44, 80.

43. 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” (Bode 5:2417).

44. Cf. Browne, *Nuṭṭatu'l-Káf* 155–56; Nabíl 326.

45. Luṭf-'Alí Mírzá, 83–84. This indicates that the prince-governor believed the Bábís were intent on insurrection.

46. Luṭf-'Alí Mírzá, 84–85. The request of the Bábís at Shaykh Ṭabarsí for a meeting with the ulama is also reported in Mír Abú-Ṭálib's eyewitness account (12). See also Browne, *Nuṭṭatu'l-Káf* 163.

47. In his paper “The Babi Concept of Holy War” (115–17), MacEoin provides an analysis of the objectives of the Bábís at Shaykh Ṭabarsí. He cites passages of Luṭf-'Alí Mírzá's history regarding this exchange, and comments that Mullá Ḥusayn refused to leave Mazandaran as “requested” by the prince (116). MacEoin gives the impression that the Bábís would not listen to reason. To call the prince's demand that the Bábís should leave Mazandaran a “request” is misleading. The prince had received emphatic instructions from Náṣiri'd-Dín Sháh in person to eradicate the Bábís, 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” (qtd. in Mehrabkhani 251). The Bábís 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 Bábís had now reneged. The prince's message was phrased in harsh language and accused the Bábís of stirring up mischief (Luṭf-'Alí Mírzá 82–83). This cannot be called a “request.” MacEoin refers to Mullá Ḥusayn's statement about not departing from Mazandaran “until the cause of God is manifested,” (“Babi Concept” 116) but leaves out his remark that he had once been deceived by

‘Abbás-Qulí Khán in Bárfurúsh, and that he would not be deceived again (Lutf-‘Alí Mírzá 89). All this makes it clear that Mullá Ḥusayn believed that the prince’s “request” was a trick, and that if the Bábís agreed and left the fort, they would be killed.

48. The translation is quoted from MacEoin, “Babi Concept” 116.

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