

**“IN THEIR PLACE”:
MARKING AND UNMARKING SHI’ISM IN PAHLAVI IRAN**

by

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For my wife and kids

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List of Abbreviations

AUFS	(American Universities Field Staff)
DDEPL	(Dwight D. Eisenhower Presidential Library)
IJMES	(<i>International Journal of Middle East Studies</i>)
FO	(Foreign Office)
LSA	(Local Spiritual Assembly)
NACPM	(National Archives, College Park, Maryland)
NFAC	(National Foreign Assessment Center)
NSA	(National Spiritual Assembly)
NSC	(National Security Council)
PKOF	(President John F. Kennedy's Office Files, 1961-1963)
SD	(State Department)
TNAPRO	(The National Archives, Public Record Office)
USDS	(United States Department of State)
WO	(War Office)
UN	(United Nations)

Note on Transliteration and Conventions

I maintain the common spelling of proper nouns. I also maintain the common spelling of Persian or Arabic words and phrases that are familiar to most English speakers. For everything else, I use a simplified version of the transliteration system used by the *International Journal of Middle East Studies (IJMES)*. For short vowels, I use “e” and “o” (instead of “i” and “u”). I also drop all diacritical marks except for ‘*ayn* (‘) and *hamzeh* (’). For most quotations, I leave the original system of transliteration intact. For quotations of translations, I occasionally apply my own system of transliteration to avoid needlessly confusing the reader. I also try to prevent reader confusion by “translating” telegrams and other forms of abbreviated English into Standard English (by adding articles and other missing elements).

CHAPTER I

Introduction

This study offers a revisionist take on the history of early Shi'ite nationalism in Iran. It asks why it is that the Shi'ite ulama (clergy) were among the Shah's most loyal supporters during the 1953 coup that restored him to power, yet a decade later clerical activists had largely abandoned royalism and a significant number had become so alienated from the regime that they espoused an early form of Shi'ite nationalism. This problem is insufficiently addressed in the existing literature, with clerical opposition in the early 1960s often explained in terms of Shi'ism's supposedly revolutionary nature, reaction against the government's attempt at land reform, Khomeini's leadership, or other factors that undervalue the historical processes that led to this shift.

In this study, I take a different approach, treating the oppositional clerical culture of the early 1960s as a cultural artifact and exploring the ways in which it was historically produced in the two decades between the 1941 abdication of Reza Shah and the uprising of June 1963. In this reevaluation, I have looked not only at Persian primary sources but also at previously unexplored British and American archival documents. Based on this material, I propose that the religious nationalism of the early 1960s was the result of the reorientation of cultural transformations that had been occurring over the preceding two decades. These cultural productions were catalyzed and shaped by a number of

developments, including an ongoing clerical campaign against the Baha'i minority¹ and British and American intervention in Iran's domestic religious policy (first to patronize the Shi'ite ulama and affiliated Islamic organizations as a bulwark against Communism, and then to pressure the Shah to discipline these "fanatics" when they came to be seen as a liability). These factors are discussed in connection with their role in the imagining of the "limits" and "sovereignty" of the Shi'ite "nation" in Iran.²

My subheading (*Marking and Unmarking Shi'ism in Pahlavi Iran*) concerns the idea that the relationship between Shi'ism and the nation was actively contested by a variety of actors during the period in question. Although the discourse on the naturalness of Shi'ism as a basis for national identity became hegemonic before the Revolution of 1979, Shi'ism was very much a marked category in the media and the public sphere during most of the Pahlavi period (1925-79). This was vigorously challenged by the Shi'ite clergy and by Islamic organizations in the years after the 1941 abdication of Reza Shah, as attempts were made to remove this marker and to recast Shi'ite identity as the defining characteristic of the unmarked national self. This unmarking of Shi'ism was a necessary prerequisite for the "return to self" that became an obsession in the 1960s, since the Shi'ism that was being "returned" to was not traditional Shi'ism, but rather the contemporaneous, *national* refashioning of the religion that had been produced and disseminated in the period after 1941.

The most heated early episode in this generally cold conflict over the constituency of the national self occurred in 1955 when the ulama initiated a pogrom against the

¹ Baha'is are the largest non-Muslim religious minority in Iran. They are discussed in detail later in this chapter.

² This study uses Benedict Anderson's definitions of "imagining," "nation," "limit," and "sovereignty." His ideas are discussed later in this chapter (see note 33).

Baha'is with the support of the Iranian government. This pogrom collapsed almost immediately, at the insistence of the Shah's British and American patrons, but was followed by an intense anti-clerical campaign (which I am the first to discuss) that was mandated and managed by the British and American governments, causing an irreparable rift between Muhammad Reza Shah and the ulama. The anti-Baha'i pogrom also resulted in a strategic shift in Western attitudes vis-à-vis the ulama. In the 1940s and early 1950s, Shi'ite clerics were patronized and empowered to act as a bulwark against Communism. After the embarrassing and destabilizing 1955 pogrom, however, the clergy became associated with disorder, fanaticism, and medievalism. The Shah was pressured to turn against them and to discipline them as his father had done, with the "object lesson" of his use of machine guns to massacre clerical forces in Mashhad in 1935.³ The Shah was initially hesitant to turn against this political base that had helped him to regain power in 1953, and had to be coerced into breaking his ties with the ulama. But, by 1963, he had internalized and naturalized his patrons' attitudes and, on his own initiative, engaged in public massacres to crush clerical opposition to his reform efforts.⁴ It was this public bloodshed, and its accompanying series of "anti-Islamic" initiatives, that led to the nascent Shi'ite nation's early articulation of an alternate "sovereignty." This claim of sovereignty, although triggered by the events of the early 1960s, was dependent on the earlier imagining of both the nature of the "nation" and its "limits."

³ For the Reza Shah period, see Appendix II and III. For the British suggestion that the Shah should emulate his father's atrocities, see TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 19 / 55, FO to Stevens, May 20, 1955.

⁴ I am focusing on the clerical opposition, but there were, of course, many other groups involved in opposition to the Shah in this period. These other currents are beyond the scope of the present study.

A “Golden Age”

The existing literature on the clerical opposition in the early 1960s—although valuable in many respects—pays insufficient attention to the historical processes responsible for the transformation in clerical attitudes between 1953 and 1963. Although a few scholars, like Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, have tried to establish historically-grounded explanations that treat the clerical opposition of 1963 as the product of larger historical processes, this has not been the typical approach.⁵ Instead, many explain this development by resorting to romantic essentialisms about Shi’ism, Great Man narratives that focus on the personal influence of figures like Ayatollah Khomeini, or economic explanations that focus on the threat that the Shah’s reforms posed for the clergy.

Scholars who offer economic explanations for 1963 are generally not interested in the specific cultural history of the ulama, or the cultural transformations that they were experiencing in this period.⁶ Early Shi’ite nationalism is instead treated as a response to the Shah’s economic policies and a symptom of the socio-economic stresses of the 1960s—one opposition thread among many. Although this explanation is useful up to a point, and these immediate causes are certainly important, they seem to be over-valued. Moreover, too strong an emphasis on contemporaneous causes tends to reify the idea that

⁵ In the conclusion of his pioneering article on anti-Baha’ism, Tavakoli-Targhi insightfully links the uprising of 1963 to a clerical turn against the Shah that began with the collapse of the anti-Baha’i pogrom of 1955 (Mohammad Tavakkoli-Targhi, “Baha’i-setizi va Islam-gara’i dar Iran,” *Iran Nameh* vol. 19, no. 1–2 (2001): pp. 79–124). In many ways, this study builds on the foundation laid by Tavakoli-Targhi and I am indebted to him for his pioneering work.

⁶ Ervand Abrahamian is the most prominent neo-Marxist historian of the Pahlavi period. In his major work, on Iranian history between the Constitutional Revolution and the Revolution of 1979, he devotes three chapters to the Tudeh party while no chapters are devoted to the ulama or Shi’ism; there is a small sub-section devoted to “clerical opposition (1963-1977),” which occupies just over six of the book’s 561 pages. See: Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), pp. 281-415, 473-479.

Shi'ite nationalism is reactionary and instinctual rather than a discourse that was produced, staged, and negotiated over an extended period by reasoned and capable actors.

Cultural historians, on the other hand, sometimes fall into essentialisms, teleology, or both when discussing the political history of the ulama in this period. The essentialists, best exemplified by Hamid Algar, see the ulama as the “natural” voice of the nation vis-à-vis the royalist state, against which they are supposedly in constant opposition. In this type of historiography, the ulama are always at the forefront of Iranian nationalism’s touchstone moments, perpetually enacting their role as the culturally authentic vanguard leading the struggle against an inauthentic, usurping Court.⁷

This approach is, in part, the product of a wider teleology, in which historical events are skewed to create the illusion of movement towards the Islamic Revolution. This later event overwhelms most narratives to the point that it leads to a false sense of inevitability and adds an air of triumphalism to the early stages of the Islamic movement that is completely inapplicable to the actual events on the ground. When one examines contemporary sources, instead of triumphalism and inevitability, one encounters among the Shi'ite leaders a sense of betrayal, desperation, and an intense desire to just survive in the face of the secular, leftist, and radical onslaught. With the aid of hindsight, it is easy

⁷ Hamid Algar is the most prominent advocate of the view that the ulama were naturally and consistently opposed to the Court. This position is best expressed in his *Religion and State in Iran, 1785-1906: The Role of the Ulama in the Qajar Period* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) and is further outlined in "The Oppositional Role of the Ulama in Twentieth-Century Iran," in *Scholars, Saints, and Sufis: Muslim Religious Institutions since 1500*, ed. Nikki Keddie (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), pp. 231-255. Algar’s work accepts and promotes the main premises and mythical history of the Shi'ite nationalist movement. He claims that the ulama were the “de facto leaders of the nation” (*Religion and State in Iran*, pp. 87, 137, 203, 216) and that they “came to express and enforce the will of the Iranian nation” (p.82). In this largely apologetic work, the ulama are always at the head of the opposition, embodying the national will and representing the nation vis-à-vis the state. Over the last thirty years, a number of studies have discredited the idea that the ulama have maintained an oppositional stance vis-à-vis the state. This re-evaluation of Algar’s narrative began with Willem Floor, "The Revolutionary Character of the Ulama: Wishful Thinking or Reality," in *Religion and Politics in Iran*, ed. Nikki Keddie (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), pp. 73-97.

to forget the fact that there was a very real fear among the religious classes of being relegated to obsolescence.

It is also a teleological reading of this period that has caused key events like the anti-Baha'i pogrom of 1955 to be either ignored completely or to be briefly discussed as an early clerical victory, a stepping stone in the ulama's march towards their ultimately successful confrontation with the state. In his main work on this period, Arjomand does not mention the anti-Baha'i pogrom.⁸ Keddie is equally silent in her major study of modern Iran.⁹ Afkhami's massive biography of the Shah also fails to discuss this pogrom.¹⁰ Abrahamian ignores the pogrom in his recent history of modern Iran, while in his more substantial study of the period he refers tangentially to the pogrom in one sentence.¹¹ Chehabi also spends one sentence on the pogrom.¹² Ansari allots four sentences to the anti-Baha'i pogrom,¹³ while Fischer devotes a paragraph to the episode.¹⁴

There are many factors that have contributed to this silence regarding the 1955 pogrom. Some of it can be attributed to difficulty incorporating the episode into the standard narrative that leads to the Islamic Revolution, but there is also the taboo against discussing the Baha'is (more than tangentially) while writing mainstream Iranian

⁸ Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

⁹ Nikki Keddie, *Modern Iran: Roots and Results of Revolution* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

¹⁰ Gholam Reza Afkhami, *The Life and Times of the Shah* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009).

¹¹ Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and *Iran between Two Revolutions*, p. 421.

¹² Houshang Chehabi, *Iranian Politics and Religious Modernism: The Liberation Movement of Iran under the Shah and Khomeini* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1990), p. 133.

¹³ Ali Ansari, *Modern Iran since 1921: The Pahlavis and After* (London: Longman, 2003), p. 144.

¹⁴ Michael M.J. Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), p. 187.

history.¹⁵ This taboo has been actively challenged in recent decades, but many of the key works on the Pahlavi period were written in the 1980s, when few were willing to mention the Baha'is in Iran, let alone incorporate them into mainstream Iranian history.¹⁶

Akhavi offers the only extended academic treatment of the anti-Baha'i pogrom in English.¹⁷ In his major study of clergy-state relations in the Pahlavi period, he spends about a dozen pages discussing the anti-Baha'i pogrom. In his view, "Nowhere... does the clergy-state relationship articulate itself so sharply as in the issue of the anti-Baha'i campaign." Despite this assessment, he treats it in isolation, without explaining the movement that led up to it or discussing its consequences. He feels it unnecessary to problematize the context and politics behind anti-Baha'ism, acting as if an explanation that the religion is a universalist heresy is sufficient context. In short, although acknowledging the occurrence and importance of a major event, he treats it, in

¹⁵ For a useful discussion of this taboo, see Ismael Velasco, "Academic Irrelevance or Disciplinary Blind-Spot?: Middle Eastern Studies and the Baha'i Faith Today," *Middle East Studies Association Bulletin* 35:2 (Winter 2001): pp. 188-98.

¹⁶ According to Juan Cole, many Iranian historians were noticeably uncomfortable when he openly discussed the Baha'is of Iran at an academic conference in 1988. Things have changed since then, to some extent. Discussing the Baha'is in Iran will no longer raise eyebrows in academic circles, but few will go so far as to incorporate the Baha'is into their treatments of the mainstream history of Iran. Some of this hesitancy is based on pragmatism rather than prejudice, since writing on the Baha'is could cause one to be marked as sympathetic to them, which could lead to problems for those who regularly engage in research in Iran (where the Baha'is have been persecuted since the Revolution of 1979). At UCLA in 1998, for example, I heard one professor say that he could not put his name on a petition against the persecution of Baha'is in Iran (that was being circulated at the time) because he traveled to Iran regularly and did not want to create problems for himself by making his sympathy for the plight of the Baha'is public. This concern with being incorrectly marked as "Baha'i" can also be seen in Houchang Chehabi's important and brave discussions of Baha'i topics, in which he repeatedly feels the need to include footnotes that make it clear to the reader that he is not a Baha'i himself (*Distant Relations: Iran and Lebanon in the last 500 years* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2006), p. 20 n70; and Chehabi, "Anatomy of Prejudice: Reflections on Secular anti-Baha'ism in Iran," in *The Baha'is of Iran: Socio-historical Studies*, ed. Seena Fazel and Dominic Brookshaw (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 196 n4).

¹⁷ Recently, Bahram Choubine has written an informed essay on this subject that is included in the appendices of Ahang Rabbani's edited translation of Choubine's *Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq va Baha'ian* (Los Angeles: Ketab Corp., 2009).

teleological fashion, as an anomaly that is useful only for showing early clerical resistance vis-à-vis the state.¹⁸

Besides these sorts of presentist readings of supposed anomalies like the anti-Baha'i pogrom, little is said about Court-clergy relations in the late 1950s except that it was a period of quietude. In this interpretation, it was Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi—the “passive” leader of the ulama from the late 1940s until his death in 1961—who prevented the clerics under him from engaging in politics and enforced quietism. In this hegemonic narrative, it was Borujerdi's death, in 1961, that freed the ulama to return to the oppositional role that they had supposedly played in earlier periods. Mehrzad Boroujerdi, for example, claims that Ayatollah Borujerdi “promoted aloofness from political involvement.”¹⁹ Keddie basically treats Borujerdi as a nonentity, only mentioning him in passing to say that he “was not unfriendly to the shah and his only important anti-regime *fatwa* [binding religious opinion concerning an issue of Islamic law] came in opposition to the land-reform proposal of 1960.”²⁰ Arjomand describes him as “apolitical” and an advocate of “political quietism.”²¹ Chehabi describes him as “a scholarly man with no political ambitions” who, after the removal of Mosaddeq, “had congratulated the Shah upon his return to Iran” and under whom “relations between the Shah's regime and the ulama were courteous and positive in the 1950s.” This relationship was utterly “harmonious” because of Borujerdi's “lofty indifference to politics.”²² Akhavi says that Borujerdi “maintained a cool aloofness from political involvement... an aloofness from

¹⁸ Shahrugh Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran: Clergy State Relations in the Pahlavi Period* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1980), pp. 76-90.

¹⁹ Mehrzad Boroujerdi, *Iranian Intellectuals and the West: The Tormented Triumph of Nativism* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1996), p. 80.

²⁰ Keddie, *Modern Iran*, p. 146.

²¹ Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown*, p. 84.

²² Chehabi, *Iranian Politics*, pp. 115, 132-3, 170, 176.

which he deviated only at the end of his life over the question of land reform.” It was his practice to “stay out of the public policy arena.” He was “cozy” with the Court and engaged in “cooperation with the state during the 1953-59 period,” which was “a ‘golden age’ for them.”²³ Abrahamian, likewise, refers to Borujerdi as “a staunch royalist,” “the epitome of the archconservative cleric who bolstered the status quo,” and a “highly apolitical cleric” who “claimed to be apolitical but in fact bolstered the royalist regime” through “the Ha’eri-Borujerdi tradition of keeping the faithful out of politics.”²⁴

Abrahamian also explains the “problem” of Khomeini’s quietism in the 1950s by blaming the “restraining hand of his patron, Borujerdi, who continued throughout the 1950s to give valuable support to the shah.”²⁵ Several others make the same claim.²⁶

Most of these treatments of Borujerdi are not only brief and tangential, but often lack citation and generally seem derivative. When his role is analyzed, it is almost always in connection with his supposed restraining influence on Khomeini, who was his student and junior colleague in this period. In 1943, Khomeini had published *Kashf al-Asrar* (*Secrets Unveiled*), an unsigned tract that is critical of Reza Shah and supposedly establishes the early date of Khomeini’s anti-regime credentials.²⁷ In the two decades between that unsigned tract and his public attacks on the regime in the 1960s, Khomeini generally maintained a “quietist” approach that was supposedly against his revolutionary personality. This “problem” of Khomeini’s quietism is explained by transferring

²³ Akhavi, *Religion and Politics*, pp. 24, 102.

²⁴ Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 8, 107.

²⁵ Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, p. 425. A slight variation of the same idea is expressed by Abrahamian in *Radical Islam: the Iranian Mojahedin* (London: IB Tauris, 1989), pp. 20-21.

²⁶ See, for example, Hamid Dabashi, *Theology of Discontent: The Ideological Foundation of the Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), pp. 412-13; Roy Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet: Religion and Politics in Iran* (London: Penguin, 1985), p. 244.

²⁷ Abrahamian, *Khomeinism*, p. 21.

responsibility to Ayatollah Borujerdi, who was the supreme *marja'-e taqlid* (source of emulation) in this period. Due to his religious obligation to follow Borujerdi's guidance, Khomeini is said to have dutifully restrained his desire to oppose the tyranny of the state. In other words, Borujerdi loses his historicity and becomes nothing more than a narrative device to explain the inconsistencies of Khomeini's activism. This approach made its way from the hagiographies of Khomeini's supporters to the early scholarly literature on the Revolution. It has continued to be repeated in derivative literature to the point that it is now accepted as obvious that Borujerdi was apolitical, cozy with the shah, and forced the ulama out of politics during the period of his leadership. This is a largely inaccurate portrayal of the Borujerdi period, as this study will demonstrate.

A lot of the problems in the existing literature occur because many of the major studies of this period are outdated. Akhavi has provided the most comprehensive study of ulama-state relations in the period between 1953 and 1963, but his study is more than thirty years old and—as a result of the limited material available at the time—almost all of his primary sources for the Borujerdi period are extracts from *Ettela'at*. This semi-official newspaper was censored heavily, and presented a government-approved image of ulama-state relations, which accounts for Akhavi's characterization of this period as a “Golden Age.”²⁸ Newly-available and heretofore unexplored archival sources, however, completely repudiate this idea. British archival sources, for example, have extensive discussions of how government press agents were able to completely block press coverage, domestic *and* foreign, of major incidents including a massacre of religious protestors.²⁹ Events such as this were, of course, not covered in sources subject to

²⁸ Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran*, p. 102.

²⁹ See Chapter V.

governmental oversight, and are only available through archival materials that were not available to Akhavi and the other standard treatments of Iran that emerged in the years immediately after 1979.

In terms of Persian sources, newspapers and magazines from this period are problematic, for the reasons discussed above. The publications of Islamic organizations from this period are a more useful resource, however, as they were not as heavily censored as the mainstream press. More recently, important clerics like Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi and Grand Ayatollah Montazeri have written memoirs and historians in Iran, like Rasul Jafarian, have produced extensive studies of Islamic organizations in this period.³⁰ Unfortunately, many of the post-Revolutionary productions are not only blatantly presentist, but are very vague about certain aspects of the Borujerdi period.

I update Akhavi's account by utilizing not only the Persian sources that were published in the years after his study, but also the tremendous amount of British and American archival sources that have recently become available for historical research. This dissertation draws primarily from these archival documents. This is mostly because my archival material has never been used before, whereas most accessible Persian primary sources have already been utilized in other studies.³¹ This is a preliminary intervention, and I am taking a specific approach to the material, but hopefully this study will encourage further research and additional sources will be brought to light. There are obvious problems involved in using British and American records to discuss Iranian

³⁰ Ali Davani, ed., *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi* (Tehran: Markaz-e Asnad-e Inqilab-e Islami, 2003); Rasul Jafarian, *Jaryanha va Sazmanha-ye Mazhabi-Siyasi Iran, 1941–1979* (Tehran: private printing, 2006); Hossein-Ali Montazeri, *Matn-e Kamel-e Khaterat-e Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri* (Essen, Germany: Nima, 2001).

³¹ The aforementioned articles by Tavakoli-Targhi and Bahram Choubine, for example, already cite, quote and engage some of the most relevant material available in the Persian-language memoirs. I offer my own gloss in Chapter VI.

history. I am aware of these issues and offer several critiques of the material (in Chapters II, VI, VII, and VIII).

Nationalism and Religious Nationalism

I do not offer any new theories on nationalism or religious nationalism, but instead seek to apply some of the insights of Anderson, van der Veer, and others to the Iranian case. The term “nationalism” first came into circulation in the late 18th century, shortly before the French Revolution (1789-99) and the American War of Independence (1775-83), which have traditionally served as the enduring models for national reformation, although this dating for the “birth” of nationalism has been challenged in recent years.³² At first, nationalism was really an umbrella term for a variety of Enlightenment ideas, including the theory of “citizenship” and the idea that governments exist to represent the interests of their citizens and could be changed by the people if they fail to uphold their rights. This was a reversal of the established order, in which subjects were loyal to the rulers of empires, who did not, in any way, believe that they were obliged to uphold the rights of citizens, at whose pleasure they served. Early nationalisms were generally primordialist in that they accepted as unproblematic the idea that national identifiers (such as “race” or the link between a particular language and a particular “people”) were static and ancient.

When primordial nationalism was taken to extreme and bloody ends following the development of fascism in Europe, and the horrors of the Second World War, nationalism took much of the blame and came under heavy criticism. Most of this criticism has

³² Gorski and Greenfeld, for example, argue that nationalism emerged several centuries before the French Revolution. See: Philip Gorski, “The Mosaic Movement: An Early Modernist Critique of Modernist Theories of Nationalism,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 105:5 (2000): 1428-1468; and Liah Greenfeld, *Nationalism: Five Roads to Modernity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992).

involved problematizing the supposedly natural and static basis for national identity. Most notably, Ernest Gellner and Eric Hobsbawm have argued that nationalism is both socially constructed and the child of modernity, although nations seek to project this modern construction as far into the past as possible.³³ They maintain that nationalism is largely pragmatic and utilitarian, serving other political and economic agendas.

Benedict Anderson also believes that nationalism is socially constructed, but stresses that although nations are imagined, they are not imaginary. He shifts the debate to the method through which the social construction of nations occurred, suggesting that a crucial element of this process was the development of “print-capitalism”, i.e. the mass production of literature in the vernacular, following the Industrial Revolution, which allowed for the common imagination of a shared community. This argument was especially useful for explaining nationalism outside of Europe and America in terms of the standardization of culture, as the result of mass printing, instead of trying to clumsily impose a European schema to the rest of the world. His framing of nationalism as a concomitant of mass printing explains how it spread in the colonial world in a way that does not frame this development in terms of a simple imitation of a Western idea.

Anderson claims that nationalism involves the imagining of a political community that is “both inherently limited and sovereign.” It is “limited” in that “no nation imagines itself coterminous with mankind,” but rather insists that the nation be bounded (although in reality boundaries are porous and elastic) and that beyond this boundary there can be found other, separate nations. It is “sovereign” in that it invokes the idea of the nation’s

³³ Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1983); and Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

political autonomy and self-determination and rejects the idea of “dynastic” rule by divine right.³⁴

Religious nationalism has been treated as a marked form of nationalism that is distinct not only from unmarked “nationalism” (which is usually used in connection with Europe) but also from other forms of marked nationalism, such as racial nationalism, or language-based nationalism. Religious nationalism has even been referred to as an “oxymoron.”³⁵ This attitude is ultimately rooted in a Comtean teleology of “progress” that sees the nation-state as the culmination of a process of political development that correlates to a process of civilizational development in which religion is superseded culturally in the same way that empire is superseded politically.³⁶ This view has been discredited by the growth in religious nationalism over the last few decades, most dramatically by the establishment of an Islamic Republic in Iran.³⁷ Nevertheless, religious nationalism is still treated as somewhat peculiar and distinct from other forms of nationalism. I try to avoid this particularism. As Friedland points out, most nationalisms are religious and it was the French Revolution, against which all later nationalisms have been compared, which was itself the peculiar case and a “world historical exception,” in that it “constituted the nation without respect to, indeed in opposition to, religion.”³⁸

The present study does not offer a new interpretation of religious nationalism. I essentially share van der Veer’s definition and approach, drawing somewhat from the work of Friedland and Chatterjee. Van der Veer sees religious nationalism as the

³⁴ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991), pp. 1-7.

³⁵ Roger Friedland, “Religious Nationalism and the Problem of Collective Representation,” *Annual Review of Sociology*, vol. 27 (August 2001): pp. 125-152.

³⁶ Anthony Giddens, *Positivism and Sociology* (London: Heinemann, 1973), pp. 1-3.

³⁷ Nikki Keddie, “Iranian Revolutions in Comparative Perspective,” in *Iran and the Muslim World: Resistance and Revolution*, ed. Nikki Keddie, (New York: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 95-111.

³⁸ Friedland, “Religious Nationalism,” pp. 129-30.

discursive re-orientation of cultural forms that had been produced earlier by specific historical processes. Like Anderson, he stresses the idea that national communities are both “limited” and “sovereign.” He also argues, with respect to the communalism associated with religious nationalism, that a central element of nationalist solidarity is the idea that the nation is always threatened by competing nationalisms and by betrayals from within.³⁹ With his focus on the Hindu nationalist movement, he plays special attention to the staging of Muslims in India as “national apostates” and argues that the construction of Hinduism as a national identity is largely framed in oppositional terms, as solidarity against this internal “threat.”⁴⁰ Partha Chatterjee likewise claims that the “history of the nation could accommodate Islam only as a foreign element” and that Islamic heritage “remains external to Indian history.”⁴¹ Juan Cole has compared the majoritarian religious nationalisms of India and Iran and pointed out that Baha’is in Iran are positioned as “national apostates” in Iranian Shi’ite nationalism in the same way that Muslims are treated in the Hindu nationalist discourse.⁴² I treat the Iranian Baha’is similarly, and make the case that anti-Baha’ism was crucially important in Shi’ism’s imagining of a religio-national political community, both in terms of its “limited” and “sovereign” nature, to use Anderson’s terms.

Like Anderson, I treat nationalism as a “cultural artifact” and I am mostly concerned with the *process* of imagining national communities. Like him, I discuss the importance of mass printing in the standardization of ideas that were previously scattered

³⁹ Peter van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism: Hindus and Muslims in India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 10, 28-9, 134, 193.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 43, 123, 134.

⁴¹ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), pp. 74, 113.

⁴² Juan Cole, "The Baha'i Minority and Nationalism in Contemporary Iran," in *Nationalism and Minority Identities in Islamic Societies*, ed. Maya Shatzmiller (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005), pp. 157-160.

and of limited reach, leading to the development of a national consensus on certain cultural issues. As part of this study, I discuss the standardization of *national* (as opposed to imperial or traditional) Shi'ism through the (“vernacular”) Islamic press operated by Islamic organizations in the post-1941 period, as well as other ways in which the Islamic activists’ imaging of “Islamic Iran” became standardized and reified. The most pervasive and unifying current in these publications was the need to come together to form a national front in order to take action against the Baha’i minority.

The Baha’i Minority in Iran

Twelver Shi’ism⁴³ is Iran’s official religion and Shi’ites presently make up approximately 90% of the population, while about 8% are Sunni Muslims, and about two percent are non-Muslim minorities.⁴⁴ In the early 1950s, there were about 15.5 million Shi’ite Muslims, 500,000 Sunni Muslims, 200,000 Baha’is, 80,000 Christians, 40,000 Jews, and 15,000 Zoroastrians.⁴⁵ Among the non-Muslim minorities, only Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism are recognized by the state and enjoy some constitutional rights, while the largest non-Muslim minority in Iran—the Baha’i Faith—has never been

⁴³ For Shi’ism, see: Moojan Momen, *An Introduction to Shi`i Islam* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1985); Said Amir Arjomand, *The Shadow of God and the Hidden Imam: Religion, Political Order, and Societal Change in Shi'ite Iran from the Beginning to 1890* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984) and (ed.) *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988); Kamran Scott Aghaie, *The Martyrs of Karbala: Shi'i Symbols and Rituals in Modern Iran* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2004); and Wilferd Madelung, *The Succession to Muhammad: A Study of the Early Caliphate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

⁴⁴ CIA World Factbook, “Iran,” accessed 12 April 2011, <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html>; and USDS, “International Religious Freedom Report 2009,” accessed 12 April 2011, <http://www.state.gov/g/drl/rls/irf/2009/127347.htm>. The percentage of non-Muslims in Iran was several times larger in the Borujerdi period, but Iran’s Muslim population has more than tripled since then, while minority numbers have remained steady or experienced decline, for a variety of reasons (including lower fertility rates and high levels of emigration). For a useful survey of minority religions in Iran, see Eliz Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁴⁵ NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 16 / 19 / 04 / Box 24, Folder 120 Isfahan, “Religious and cultural groups,” July 15, 1952.

officially recognized and has never received any constitutional protection. It should be noted that although the American assessment of 200,000 Baha'is in the early 1950s seems accurate, determining the number of believers in Iran is difficult.⁴⁶

The Baha'i Faith began in 1863 as an offshoot of the Babi religion (which was itself an offshoot of the Shaykhi school of Twelver Shi'ism). The Babi movement began in Shiraz in 1844 when a young man (Sayyed Ali Mohammad, 1819-1850, later known as the Bab) claimed to be the bearer of divine knowledge and to be the "Gate" (*bab*) to the *mahdi* (Shi'ism's main messianic figure).⁴⁷ He quickly attracted a number of followers, although his early message was rather vague. By 1848, he openly claimed to be the *mahdi* himself and announced the inauguration of a new religious cycle, featuring an entirely new holy book and system of laws.⁴⁸

As the Babis increasingly broke with Islam, and some Babis became anxious for revolutionary change—while at the same time the Shi'ite clergy increasingly sought to suppress the new heresy—hostilities escalated and a number of armed conflicts occurred in the late 1840s and early 1850s.⁴⁹ This threat prompted the Iranian government to join forces with the ulama to massacre the Babis involved in the conflicts as well as several other Babi leaders, including the Bab himself, who was killed in 1850. In retaliation,

⁴⁶ See Appendix I.

⁴⁷ For more information on the *mahdi*, see: Abdulaziz Sachedina, *Islamic Messianism: The Idea of the Mahdi in Twelver Shi'ism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1981); and Abbas Amanat, *Apocalyptic Islam and Iranian Shi'ism* (London: IB Taurus, 2009).

⁴⁸ For the Babi religion (and relevant aspects of Shaykhism), see: Abbas Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal: the Making of the Babi Movement in Iran, 1844-1850* (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 2005); and Denis MacEoin, *The Messiah of Shiraz: Studies in Early and Middle Babism* (Leiden: Brill, 2009). The latter work is a massive compilation of almost everything that MacEoin has written on the topic.

⁴⁹ For the Babi approach to holy war, see MacEoin, *The Messiah of Shiraz*, pp. 451-493. For a discussion of the most famous Babi-state conflict, see Siyamak Zabihi-Moghaddam, "The Babi-State Conflict at Shaykh Tabarsi," *Iranian Studies* Vol. 35, No. 1/3 (Winter - Summer, 2002): pp. 87-112.

some Babis attempted to assassinate the Shah in 1852.⁵⁰ When this plot failed, thousands of Babis were slaughtered.⁵¹ The religion survived underground, however, with several prominent Babis living in exile in Ottoman territories.

The Baha'i Faith emerged gradually in the decades following the bloody suppression of its Babi predecessor, when one of the prominent Babis in exile, Mirza Husayn Ali (1817-92), refashioned and revived the Babi community, proclaimed himself to be a new messenger from God, took the name Baha'u'llah (the "Glory of God"), and formed the Baha'i religion from the ashes of the Babi movement. The Baha'i Faith rejected many of the more extreme Babi practices and instead worked peacefully to promote a progressive, moderate message centered on the idea of unity and shared humanity.⁵²

The Baha'i Faith—which is also referred to as Baha'ism (although this term is disliked by adherents)—promotes the idea that the global processes associated with modernity were the symbolic fulfillment of many of the eschatological expectations of previous religions, but that the key element of this historic turn was not the end of time but rather the beginning of a new cycle of human history in which, for the first time, humanity would share a united global homeland. Baha'u'llah rejected ideas such as ritual impurity and holy war and instead promoted world citizenship, democracy, and collective

⁵⁰ Abbas Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe: Nasir al-Din Shah Qajar and the Iranian Monarchy, 1831-1896* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 204-218.

⁵¹ For a Baha'i version of Babi history, see Shoghi Effendi Rabbani, ed. and trans., *Nabil's Narrative* (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1970). This work is a sacred narrative by an early believer loosely translated into English by the then head of the religion. It employs elements of hagiography and martyrology, which one would expect given the text's audience and purpose.

⁵² For the differences between the two religions and a critique of the ways in which they have been conflated, see Denis MacEoin, "From Babism to Baha'ism: Problems of Militancy, Quietism, and Conflation in the Construction of a Religion," *Religion* vol. 13 (1983): pp. 219-55.

security, while also condemning racism and signaling approval of gender equality.⁵³

Although they were conservative on issues of personal morality (such as alcohol consumption, gambling, and sex outside of marriage), Baha'is were very socially progressive in other areas, especially in comparison with the social positions of mainstream Shi'ism. For this reason, in Iran it became common to mark progressive or liberal social policies or behavior as "Baha'i."⁵⁴

The new religion attracted a significant following in Baha'u'llah's lifetime, initially from among Babis, but later from the wider Iranian society, including significant levels of conversion from Jewish and Zoroastrian communities.⁵⁵ As the Baha'i Faith grew in Iran, Baha'u'llah continued his exile in the Ottoman Empire, and was eventually sent, as a political prisoner, to a remote prison in Ottoman Palestine (near the city of Haifa in present-day Israel). Following his death, his burial place became a shrine, and the remains of the Bab were also smuggled into Palestine and were buried in the same area, and also became a shrine. Although most Baha'is were Iranian in the early period, the religion's headquarters remained in Palestine after Baha'u'llah's death because of the

⁵³ For Baha'u'llah's position on social issues, see Juan Cole, *Modernity & the Millennium: The Genesis of the Baha'i Faith in the Nineteenth-Century Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). For a basic survey of Baha'u'llah's life, see: Moojan Momen, *Baha'u'llah: A Short Biography* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2007). For Baha'u'llah's writings, see *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1982); *The Kitáb-i-Aqdas: The Most Holy Book*. (Wilmette, Illinois: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1993); and *The Kitáb-i-Íqán: The Book of Certitude* (Wilmette, Illinois: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1982). For one of the best general surveys of the Baha'i Faith, see Peter Smith, *The Babi and Baha'i Religions: From Messianic Shi'ism to a World Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). For an excellent collection of articles on key aspects of Baha'i history in Iran, see Seena Fazel and Dominic Brookshaw (ed.) *The Baha'is of Iran: Socio-historical Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

⁵⁴ See the discussion of this trope in Negar Mottahedeh's *Representing the Unrepresentable: Historical Images of National Reform from the Qajars to the Islamic Republic of Iran* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2007) pp. 22-50. Also see the section on "The hue and cry of Baha'ism" in Appendix III.

⁵⁵ Juan Cole suggests that there were around 200,000 Baha'is in Iran shortly after Baha'u'llah's death. He also reports that an internal Baha'i census identified about a million individuals who were either members of the religion or attended Baha'i gatherings somewhat regularly in the 1920s (Cole, "The Baha'i Minority," pp. 131-32). For non-Muslim conversions to the Baha'i Faith, see: Fereydon Vahman and Mehrdad Amanat's chapters in Fazel and Brookshaw's *The Baha'is of Iran*, and Mehrdad Amanat, *Jewish Identities in Iran: Resistance and Conversion to Islam and the Baha'i Faith* (London: IB Taurus, 2011).

presence of the holy shrines in the Haifa area. Generations later, following the creation of Israel, this became problematic for the Baha'is in Iran, since their opponents claimed that they were based out of Israel because they were Zionist agents

Baha'u'llah empowered his son, Abdu'l-Baha (1844-1921) to lead the Baha'i community after his death and to interpret his teachings. He also envisioned and called for the creation of an elected global council (the Universal House of Justice) to lead the community, resolve differences, and legislate on matters pertaining to the Baha'i community. This institution was eventually formed in 1963, after there was a large enough worldwide community to sustain it. In the years between Baha'u'llah's death in 1892 and the election of the Universal House of Justice, the religion was led by Baha'u'llah's son, Abdu'l-Baha (until his death in 1921), then by his great-grandson, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (until his death in 1957) and, finally, by a group of individuals appointed by Shoghi Effendi in the 1957-1963 interregnum.

The Abdu'l-Baha period witnessed the establishment of strong Baha'i communities in Europe, America, and elsewhere, and was characterized by the acceptance of multiple religious identities and a focus on spreading the universal principles of the Baha'i religion rather than, necessarily, gaining members in a formal sense.⁵⁶ In the Shoghi Effendi period, the Baha'i community underwent a profound

⁵⁶ For Abdu'l-Baha's teachings, see *Writings and Utterances of Abdu'l-Baha* (New Delhi, India: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 2000). For a sense of Abdu'l-Baha's personality and leadership style, see Mirza Mahmud Zarqani, *Mahmud's Diary: Chronicling 'Abdu'l-Baha's Journey to America*, trans. Mohi Sobhani (Oxford, UK: George Ronald, 1998); and Juliet Thompson, *The Diary of Juliet Thompson* (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1983). Marzieh Gail has written several important works on the Abdu'l-Baha period, sharing her family's story, see *Summon Up Remembrance* (Oxford, UK: George Ronald, 1987) and *Arches of the Years* (Oxford, UK: George Ronald, 1991). For Abdu'l-Baha's approach to Islam, see Oliver Scharbrodt, *Islam and the Baha'i Faith: A Comparative Study of Muhammad 'Abduh and 'Abdul-Baha 'Abbas* (New York: Routledge, 2011). For the spread of the Baha'i Faith to America during this period, see Robert Stockman, *The Baha'i Faith in America: Origins 1892-1900* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1985) and *The Baha'i Faith in America, Volume 2: Early Expansion 1900-1912* (Oxford, UK: George Ronald, 1994).

transformation. The focus shifted to community building and numerical and geographic expansion by an increasingly regimented membership. The community gained more rigid borders as membership requirements became more stringent and there was a tightening of sectarian identity.⁵⁷ In the 1950s, for example, Iranian Baha'is have related that before a planned campaign of intensive growth (from 1953-63) there were “purges” and “disciplinary action” in which “backsliders” were pressured to resign.⁵⁸ The short-term goal driving everything else was the need to establish the Baha'i Faith as an independent world religion by demonstrating its separateness from Islam and Christianity and by increasing its global reach. The Universal House of Justice has continued Shoghi Effendi's focus on systematic, quantifiable expansion.

Despite the Baha'i Faith's successful global expansion,⁵⁹ and official recognition in almost every country, the Iranian Baha'i community does not now, and has never, enjoyed official recognition. Its outsider status was reified in Iran's first constitution (1906, modified in 1907), which recognizes other non-Muslim minority groups, and provides them with certain rights, while not acknowledging the existence of the Baha'i Faith.

There are many reasons why Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism could be integrated, while the Baha'is could not, but the most crucial differences between the Baha'is and recognized non-Muslim minorities are that they are a post-Islamic religion

⁵⁷ Compare Abdu'l-Baha's approach, as seen in the citations above, with, for example, Shoghi Effendi's *Baha'i Administration* (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1974). For the Shoghi Effendi period in general, see Ugo Giachery, *Shoghi Effendi – Reflections* (Oxford, UK: George Ronald, 1973) and Ruhyyih Rabbani, *The Priceless Pearl* (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969).

⁵⁸ E. A. Bayne, “Bahais Again: The Larger Question: Speculations on the Significance of the Bahai Religious Sect in Iran” (New York: American Universities Field Staff, 1955), p. 7.

⁵⁹ According to the official website of the worldwide Baha'i community, there are now 5 million Baha'is in 100,000 localities, including “2,100 indigenous tribes, races, and ethnic groups” (*Bahá'í World News Service*, “Statistics,” accessed 12 April 2011, <http://news.bahai.org/media-information/statistics>).

(and therefore seen as necessarily heretical, since Islam—as commonly understood—does not allow for the possibility of additional prophets and holy books after Mohammad) and that they were actively engaged in seeking converts from the Muslim majority, while the recognized minorities did not engage in this type of behavior.⁶⁰ Because of the Baha'is' focus on aggressively seeking converts, they were rightly viewed as a threat to Islam's position of dominance.⁶¹ Three decades after Baha'u'llah's death, an internal Baha'i census found that approximately a million Iranians were either believers or had attended Baha'i gatherings (out of a population of approximately ten million).⁶² This initial, massive expansion was later constrained by internal and external factors, which caused the Baha'i population in Iran to stagnate, but the desire for numerical expansion, and efforts in this regard, have been constant, causing many Shi'ites to view the Baha'is as a threat to Shi'ite primacy.

Aside from the threat of proselytization, the Shi'ite ulama, and others, have opposed the Baha'is for their anti-clericalism, perceived apostasy, advocacy of a liberal social agenda, supposed corruption, and reputation for being the favored local clients of foreign powers.⁶³ Because of their apolitical stance and rejection of violence, they were

⁶⁰ The Christian community in Iran is primarily made up of ethnic Armenians and Assyrians, who have not sought to aggressively convert Muslims. In the modern period, Christian missionaries have attempted to convert the Muslim majority and this has caused restrictions on these groups, in response to this behavior, which do not apply to the traditional Christian communities in Iran.

⁶¹ Baha'i scriptures forbid members from engaging in "proselytization." Baha'is aggressively seek new converts, however, and engage in behavior that outside observers consider proselytization. Baha'is maintain that they simply share information with interested individuals, and that this is not proselytization. This is a matter of semantics. Baha'is generally say that proselytization involves coercion or other practices that are not necessary elements in most definitions of proselytization, and they then argue against this straw man to show that they do not engage in such behavior. Michael Fischer provides a useful discussion of his encounters with Baha'is and their repeated attempts to convert him, despite his lack of interest. See Michael Fischer, *Debating Muslims: Cultural Dialogues in Postmodernity and Tradition* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990), pp. 222-24.

⁶² Cole, "The Baha'i Minority," pp. 131-32.

⁶³ I discuss some of these issues in more detail in Chapter III and Appendix III.

an easy target and were sometimes used as proxies or scapegoats in struggles in which they were only peripherally involved, if at all.⁶⁴

In the period covered by this study, they were also targeted because of their numerical expansion and increased public visibility as a result of a major push for expansion and recognition during the decade before the religion's centennial celebration in 1963. This growth in membership and public visibility, coupled with the perceived favoritism enjoyed by the Baha'is in the army and civil service, as well as in foreign employment, caused the ulama a great deal of worry and led some to advocate pressuring the new Shah to redress this perceived imbalance and restore Shi'ite primacy.

The Iranian constitution at the time (like all earlier and later versions) recognized only Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism, with the Baha'is having no civil existence. In a sense, this silence implicitly denied their right to exist and blocked their access to the rights of their fellow citizens. At the same time, while the recognized minorities enjoyed certain guarantees (like representation in the majles—Iran's parliament), they were legally prevented from holding senior positions and their access to positions of power was limited by formal and informal quotas or prohibitions. Because Baha'is had no status, they were not subject to consistent restrictions and could be treated worse than recognized minorities on some occasions, while on other occasions they could

⁶⁴ I am speaking in general when I say that the Baha'is were non-violent and did not fight back against aggression. In the early decades of the religion, there were occasions when some Baha'is fought with and occasionally killed members of a rival group (Azalis—i.e. Babis who did not accept Baha'u'llah), and in the later Pahlavi period the Baha'is of Sangsar developed a militant reputation, but violence was exceedingly rare and was condemned by the Baha'i leadership. For the origins of anti-Baha'i attitudes, see: Mohammad Tavakoli-Targhi's "Anti-Baha'ism and Islamism in Iran," Abbas Amanat's "The Historical Roots of the Persecution of Babis and Baha'is in Iran," and Houshang Chehabi's "Anatomy of Prejudice: Reflections on Secular anti-Baha'ism in Iran," in Fazel and Brookshaw, *The Baha'is of Iran*; Denis MacEoin, *A People Apart: The Baha'i Community of Iran in the Twentieth Century* (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1989); Roger Cooper, *The Baha'is of Iran* (London: Minority Rights Group, 1982); and Mina Yazdani, "Religious Contentions in Modern Iran, 1881-1941" (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 2011).

be treated as indistinguishable from Muslim Iranians and advance to positions of power, or be disproportionately represented in certain institutions, in ways that were not possible for the recognized non-Muslim minorities.

The anti-Baha'i movement during the Borujerdi period wanted to remove this ambiguity by making it explicit that Baha'is were to have no civil rights or access to positions of influence. This movement considered the nebulous and unquantifiable Baha'i "infiltration" of the nation to be an imminent threat to Iran's continued existence as a Shi'ite nation, unless the nation were to rally together to force the removal of this perceived threat.

Organization

The following seven chapters can be divided into three groups. Chapters II and III discuss the Islamic revival that followed the 1941 abdication of Reza Shah. The removal of his "iron fist" led to a period of unparalleled political openness that allowed for the proliferation of Islamic societies and organizations and the return of prohibited displays of public religiosity (such as wearing the veil or self-cutting during Ashura commemorations).⁶⁵ I explain the changes in governmental and clerical authority that allowed for the transformations of this period and explore two Islamic organizations that emerged in this period and are important for our purposes (the Brotherhood Party and the

⁶⁵ The earlier proscription of Islamic dress is discussed in Appendix II. Religiosity and resistance at Ashura is an important recurring theme in this study. Ashura is the tenth day of the month of Moharram in the Islamic calendar. On this day in 680, Husayn ibn Ali (Mohammad's grandson and the Third Imam of mainstream Shi'ism) was martyred while resisting the tyranny of Yazid, the second caliph of the Umayyad period. Every year, Shi'ites commemorate this tragedy through a number of ritual observances. Large processions are common at Ashura, and these sometimes include individuals who whip or cut themselves to re-enact and collectively participate in the suffering of Husayn during his martyrdom at Karbala. It should be noted that the Islamic calendar is lunar, so each year Ashura falls on a different day according to the solar calendar. This also applies to other Islamic observations, such as Ramadan.

Feda'iyān-e Islam). My main argument, which extends over both chapters, is that Shi'ism in Iran was being transformed into a *national* religion in this period, at least in the literature of the Islamic associations. Part of this involved the movement to create an "Islamic Iran," to undo the marking of Shi'ism that occurred in the Reza Shah period and to instead frame Shi'ism as an unmarked constituent of Iranian national identity. This movement in the Islamic associations, largely driven by lay activists, was vague and internally divided about what exactly was involved in "Islamic Iran" and how this was to be achieved. I argue that anti-Baha'ism served as a counter-melody to the staging of Shi'ism as an unmarked national identity, providing an issue that united diverse Islamic factions and facilitated the mainstream clergy's adoption of the national and populist arguments of the Islamic associations. As part of this process, scattered local strands of anti-Baha'ism and various obscure libels and conspiracies were standardized and nationalized through the Islamic publications, which allowed for a reified national Islamic discourse on this perceived threat and on the need for national solidarity to combat it.

The fourth, fifth, and sixth chapters explore the anti-Baha'i pogrom of 1955 from different perspectives. Chapter IV outlines the main features of the pogrom and explains why the government joined with the ulama and the Islamic associations to attack the Baha'i minority before being forced to reverse itself under Anglo-American pressure. This chapter treats the pogrom, and especially its culmination in the partial destruction of the National Baha'i Center, as an object lesson by the Islamic movement, which was intended to demonstrate the primacy of Shi'ism in Iran. Like the destruction of the Babri mosque in Ayodhya, this attack on a soft target of the internal Other was a political move

meant to convey the “limits” of the religious majority. Chapter V analyzes the consequences of the Anglo-American intervention that forced the Shah to renege on his promise to join with the clergy in their anti-Baha’i campaign. This intervention forced the new Shah to choose between his foreign patrons and his supporters among the traditional elite. The resulting vacillation and the complications of this triangular relationship are explored, with emphasis placed on how and why Borujerdi failed to achieve any of the pogrom’s stated goals. Borujerdi’s failure and humiliation in this episode is compared to the relative success of the Brotherhood Party in its own confrontation with the state, and I suggest that there was mounting clerical dissatisfaction with Borujerdi’s insistence on working within the established system and acting as a loyal opposition. Chapter VI contrasts the ways in which the pogrom was framed by the ulama, the Baha’is, the government, and the British and American diplomats. I reveal a tangle of intersecting authority claims and the use of the same tropes at cross purposes across a number of discursive currents. Especially important is the contrast between the Anglo-American and clerical discourse. In both discourses, the violence against Baha’is is staged as natural, primordial, and symptomatic of a need to remove the agitators threatening the nation. In the clerical discourse, it is “the people” that are engaging in violence against the Baha’is, and this is framed as a natural, almost reflexive defense of the nation against an internal cancer (the Baha’is) that must be extracted if the nation is to be healthy and progress. In the Anglo-American discourse, the Baha’is and the educated middle class are “the people” who are being attacked by the clergy, whose violence is seen as primordial, and natural. In this scenario, the ulama were staged as a spreading cancer on the nation, whose influence must not be allowed to grow.

Chapters VII and VIII explore the anti-clerical policies and orientation that developed in the decade from the end of the anti-Baha'i pogrom in 1955 until 1965, and the clerical response to the move against them. This turn against the clergy, who were previously the biggest supporters of the new Shah, was the result of intense Anglo-American pressure on their client state to maintain order by disciplining fanaticism. This intervention began to prevent the persecution of the Baha'is, but evolved into an imperial micro-management of Iran's internal religious policy, which resulted in clerical alienation from the Shah and the conflation of the regime, the Baha'is, and the Americans into the hydra-headed enemy of the "Muslim nation" constituting Iran. As the Shah increasingly targeted the ulama—while simultaneously promoting policies widely read as surrendering Iran's sovereignty to Baha'is and Americans—this led to the rhetorical dismissal of the Shah, the assertion of Shi'ite sovereignty in 1964, and the attempted assassination of the Shah in 1965.

The appendices provide useful information that did not fit into the structure of my argument but which provide useful background information. Appendix I deals with the complicated issue of Baha'i numbers in Iran and explains my reasons for estimating that there were about a quarter of a million Baha'is in Iran in 1955 (out of a population of about 20 million). Appendix II looks at the Reza Shah period (1921-1941) and pays special attention to his policies vis-à-vis Shi'ism and how they related to the regime's nationalization projects, particularly the push for a "national dress." I suggest that in this period there was a hegemonic elite discourse (in official decrees and the government-controlled press) in which Shi'ism was increasingly marked as "foreign" and the Other to Iran's unmarked national self, which was instead associated with Iran's pre-Islamic past

and post-Islamic future. This discourse found nominal support beyond the educated elite, but was perpetuated by the Shah's use of violent coercion, which cowed most of the opposition and humiliated the ulama by forcing them to support his policies through actions such as bringing their wives, unveiled, to celebrations of state policy. The clerical attempt to recover from the Reza Shah period, by regaining their dignity and authority and unmarking Shi'ism, provides the immediate historical background for the transformations explored throughout this study. Finally, Appendix III deals with the 1924 murder of an American diplomat in Iran after he was (falsely) accused of being a Baha'i. This episode was constantly invoked in 1955, and is an important episode in the early history of American policy in Iran.

In Chapter IX, my conclusion, I point out some of the defining features of the early Shi'ite nationalist discourse in Iran, including the collective forgetting involved in staging the myth of the nation's birth in the fires of 1963. Taken together, these chapters reveal the historical developments and cultural transformations involved in the imagining of the limits of the Shi'ite nation, the historicity of its claims of sovereignty, and its re-orientation into a nationalist discourse.

CHAPTER II

“Reza Shah Must Have Been Spinning in His Grave”: Mohammad Reza Shah, Borujerdi, and the Clerical Riposte, 1941-1953

Reza Shah must have been spinning in his grave at Rey. To see the arrogance and effrontery of the Mullahs once again rampant in the holy city! How the old tyrant must despise the weakness of his son, who has allowed these turbulent priests to regain so much of their reactionary influence. In the old man's day they would have had their turbans nailed to their head by the police—with long and rusty nails!¹

Introduction

In the height of the Second World War, Iran was occupied by Allied forces due to concerns about Reza Shah's links to Germany, which were considered serious enough to prompt regime change because of Iran's strategic importance and oil wealth. The Shah was forced to abdicate in favor of his son, Mohammad Reza, who was only twenty-one years old when he assumed the throne in September 1941. The new Shah wielded no real political power and was maintained largely for the sake of continuity. The relative independence of the Reza Shah period was undone by the occupation, and Iran was again controlled by the British in the south and by the Russians in the north, just as had occurred during the Qajar dynasty that preceded Pahlavi rule.

¹ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 127075 / EP1015 / 30, “Notes on Meshed, June 1957.” For Reza Shah's religious policies, see Appendix II.

Even after the end of the War and the occupation, the new Shah remained largely a figurehead, with political power centered in the majles (parliament), a condition that persisted until the early 1950s. For the dozen years between 1941 and 1953, Iran experienced a period of political openness that contrasted sharply with the royal dictatorships that occurred before and after this interregnum. During this time, there was an explosive growth in political parties and associations, on both the Left and the Right.² It was also in this period that the new Shah slowly developed a desire to rule Iran completely, as his father had done.

In this chapter, I explore the early rule of the new Shah and its implications for Islam in Iran. I pay special attention to the emergence of Islamic religio-political associations and their partnership with the clerical hierarchy in the struggle against Communism, a struggle that was patronized by Britain and America because of Iran's strategic importance in the Cold War. I argue that the removal of Reza Shah's "iron fist" led to a re-discovery of Islam which, at the popular level, took the form of a widespread Islamic revival and which, among the new generation of Islamic activists, led to the articulation of a nostalgic and utopian reading of Islam as a panacea for the weakness, chaos, and poverty of the 1940s. As this discourse developed, "Islam" (i.e. the Usuli version of Twelver Shi'ism accepted by most Iranians) increasingly came to be regarded not just as the state religion, but as Iran's *national* religion, with Shi'ism being treated as an unmarked characteristic of the national self. This was an absolute reversal of the Reza Shah period, in which Shi'ism was very much a marked category.³ The early stages of

² When I speak of "the Left" in this period, my intent is primarily Tudeh (the largest and most important communist organization in Iran at the time), which was formed in 1941. For more information on Tudeh and related groups, see Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, pp. 281-418.

³ See Appendix II.

this nationalization of Islam are identified in this chapter, but my focus is more on the changes to the political environment that allowed this to occur. The following chapter continues the argument and addresses the further development, and more sophisticated expression, of this national reformation of Iranian Islam.

The Islamic Revival

By the end of Reza Shah's reign, his marginalization of Islam was beginning to have a noticeable, if superficial, effect. The British military handbook for Reza Shah's final year, for example, noted that despite the tests of the War, "the influence of religion in general is tending to decline."⁴ After the removal of Reza Shah, however, there was an almost immediate revival in religiosity that was widespread and undeniable. The most commonly referred to examples of this trend include previously banned Islamic dress becoming a common sight, the return of gender segregation in some locations, and the reappearance of ecstatic mourning in Moharram during Ashura processions.⁵

The 1944 Moharram observances in Mashhad, for example, were described by observers as being the largest since 1930. Even the February commemoration of the death of Imam Hasan (Imam Husayn's brother) was celebrated at a "pre-Pahlavi" level, with shops and cinemas closed for three days and even Soviet troops in the city marching in honor of the occasion (under the cover that it also marked a Soviet military anniversary).⁶ This return to extravagant, public expressions of religiosity during the large festivals was not an expression of opposition to Mohammad Reza Shah, but was rather a collective testing of the waters in which conservative Shi'ites pushed upon the

⁴ TNAPRO, WO 252 / 827, "Military Handbook for Persia, 1940-41."

⁵ NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 16 / 4 / Box 49, 800 – "Reactionary trend in religion, 1942".

⁶ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 40184, Mashhad to FO, February 26, 1944.

boundaries of what was now acceptable in order to convince themselves that the “iron fist” of Reza Shah had indeed been removed from over their head.

According to the ulama, these types of popular displays of religiosity during Moharram were a mandate by the people for a wholesale return to Qajar-era religiosity and a rollback of all of Reza Shah’s anti-clerical policies. As part of this effort to restore previous norms, Ayatollah Qomi came to Mashhad from Iraq to lobby Governor-General Mansur to return clerical control of all endowments, force veiling, and provide strong religious training in government schools. These clerical appeals were initially rebuffed using the “bogy” of the Russian presence to discourage further insistence.⁷

With the conclusion of the War, these large public displays of religiosity began to change from spontaneous popular expressions to purposeful political demonstrations. In 1945, Ashura commemorations in Tehran, for example, “showed a marked tendency back to the days of black religious reaction” since “the demonstrations this year had marked political overtones of a rather disturbing nature.” In the south of the city, when police tried to prevent organized demonstrations involving extreme self-flagellation, the crowds turned on the police. In response, officers opened fire on the Ashura mourners and killed four. Prime Minister Bayat was blamed for having allowed self-flagellation at the last minute without also removing the security forces’ orders to use force to prevent this practice. As a result, “bloodshed under such circumstances was almost inevitable.” The British saw this desire for self-mutilation at Ashura as part of a shameful return to “savage customs” that was also blamed on the ineptitude of the government.⁸

⁷ Ibid., FO 371 / 40184 / E 1981, political situation report, March 29, 1944.

⁸ USDS, *Iran, 1945-1949*, Reel 7: 333.

The revival of interest in Islam, partly fueled by nostalgia, influenced the press's attitude vis-à-vis the ulama. In the Reza Shah period, the mainstream press—at the government's instruction—praised clerics for becoming Western and discarding the turban. In the wake of the post-abdication Islamic revival, however, they were criticized for this complicity, and were, for a brief period, scapegoats for the decline in religion. The press ridiculed them for having transformed from traditionalists who refused to sit in chairs into modern, hat-wearing sippers of champagne.⁹

This post-War nostalgia, and the scapegoating of those who had adopted Westernized dress, formed the seeds of what Al-e Ahmad later popularized as *gharbzadegi* (“Westoxification”).¹⁰ In this early period, however, the concept was more rooted in nostalgia than nativism. Cartoons, for example, sanctified the moral superiority of the earlier generation, placing them in heaven, while showing modern Iranians as doomed for hell.¹¹ This is not surprising, as many societies experiencing the intersection of economic depression and massive urbanization tend to blame their unpleasant situation on moral discontinuity with the past, believing that their rejection of tradition and aloofness from piety were responsible for the downturn in their fortunes.

The post-Reza Shah zeitgeist was infused with a sense of profound loss and a longing for a more integrated sense of self. These sentiments found expression not only in the mainstream press but also in the more peripheral literature. In a labor guide, for example, readers are edified through the cautionary tale of Maryam Sultan. This traditional woman lived a simple, innocent life in which she was unaware of modern culture and was content to learn all she needed to know of the world through her local

⁹ NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 16 / 4 / Box 49, 800 – “Reactionary trend in religion, 1942”.

¹⁰ Jalal Al-e Ahmad, *Gharbzadegi* (Tehran: Ravaq, 1962).

¹¹ NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 16 / 4 / Box 49, 800 – “Reactionary trend in religion, 1942”.

cleric. One day, a Westernized woman teases her by telling her of paradisiacal Hollywood images in the cinemas, featuring bare, *houris*-like women who enjoy lifestyles of unimaginable luxury in heavenly palaces, and of images of glamorous women kissing men before a “thousand eyes” (i.e. the audience). Hollywood was, she was told, the Qur’anic paradise made tangible and projected in widescreen. Repulsed, but intrigued, Maryam eventually goes to see a Western movie for herself. Despite having been promised fantastical images of heaven and *houris* of paradise, all she sees is hellfire and damnation writ large. She goes home only to have her husband beat her for her experimentation with modernity. Shamed, she finds herself in the unenviable position of being repulsed by the gloss of the new world, but too shamed and embarrassed to return to her old religious gatherings. She is left in the anguish of perpetual liminality, like many of her generation.¹²

Unlike the confusion and liminality felt by many, the ulama were unambiguous in their approval of the abdication of Reza Shah and in their embrace of the opportunities that it brought. The change in political leadership was a new beginning for the Shi’ite clergy, who had been forced off the national stage under Reza Shah. As Jafarian puts it, “The devout were even more joyous at the departure of Reza Shah than the rest of the population, beating on the drums of jubilation... It was as if they were a bird that had been freed from its cage and was again taking to flight.”¹³

Ahmad Kasravi expresses the same idea from the perspective of a secular intellectual witnessing firsthand the reversals of the Reza Shah period:

¹² USDS, *Iran, 1950-1954*, Reel 44: 90-92.

¹³ Jafarian, *Jaryanha va Sazmanha*, p. 23.

Those [clerics] who had been dressing in [the Western clothing that Reza Shah imposed on Iran] reverted to wearing their previous turban and cloak. Those who had previously slithered back into their holes now crept into the open to yet again rage against secular law, science, and all beneficial things. Once more, a new brood of mullahs—primed for leaching and parasitism—emerged in the desolation.¹⁴

Within two years of the abdication, this trend was becoming alarming to British observers, who shared Kasravi's apprehension and felt that this "religious revival" must be opposed because it threatened to retard Reza Shah's modernizing trajectory. In their view, "Iran must not be allowed again to take the veil. Religion was alright to the extent that it gave the people a moral basis for their lives, but it must not be allowed to interfere with progress."¹⁵

American observers were less concerned than the British by the Islamic revival at first, but, by 1948, they were perturbed by some aspects of the trend. Revival alone was considered innocuous, although "primitive," and even scattered assaults on unveiled women and on stores that did not close for Ramadan were considered "not serious." The Americans were, however, "seriously disturbed" by the political activities of the clergy, which had reached the point that "very modernized" individuals, like the Minister of Education, felt the political need to "bow" before the clergy to the extent of ordering that all public school teachers "take pupils to Mosque once every day, girls in veils, for prayers."¹⁶

The Minister of Education, Dr. Siassi, agreed to this demand for public religiosity after he was repeatedly attacked by political rivals over the lack of religious education, as a part of their attempt to win over the traditionalists. The situation came to a head when,

¹⁴ Kasravi, *Dadgah* (Tehran: Ketabfurushi-ye Paaydar, 1957), p. 55.

¹⁵ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1426 / G 500 / 22 / 43, Secret Minutes, July 2, 1943.

¹⁶ USDS, *Iran, 1945-1949*, Reel 7: 338.

while addressing the majles on April 24, 1948, Dr. Siassi made the mistake of sharing his views against compulsory Shi'ite religious training in schools, on the grounds "that since there are many Christians, Jews and Zoroastrians among the student body, it would be unfair to force any [one] religion upon these students." These comments caused conservative deputies to denounce the Minister, saying: "Be quiet, you idiot... This is a Moslem country!" One deputy denounced him as "an infidel, a son of a dog, a whoreson, and an atheist." Ayatollah Behbahani and his associates walked out in protest, followed by the speaker of the majles. These comments eventually resulted in the Minister's removal from office as a result of clerical pressure.¹⁷

This episode and the larger phenomenon of the political courting of the ulama led to an increase in their prestige. "The strength of the mullahs," it was felt, "appears to be growing steadily, if not obviously, and as far as one can see, both the Shah and the officials seem to be anxious to obtain and keep their support."¹⁸ The Shah, for example, made a regular show of worshipping at the Shrine of Imam Reza in Mashhad. In this same city, the Governor-General "has started a purity campaign to clean up the holy city, and has given a favourable ear to requests from the religious elements to restrict the sale of liquor and increase religious teaching in the schools."¹⁹ It was as a result of this entry by the ulama into the political realm that Islamic education was reintroduced to public schools in 1948 for the first time since its removal by Reza Shah.²⁰

From the American perspective, this political pandering was the result of the "severe nervous strain Iranians have been under due to Soviet threats." Because of Iran's

¹⁷ Ibid., 345.

¹⁸ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 75462 / E8602, Mashhad consular report, July 1, 1949.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Tavakoli-Targhi, "Anti-Baha'ism and Islamism," p. 201.

precarious position as a Cold War battlefield, “reactionary mullahs have taken advantage of the situation to appeal for a return to strict Moslem ways. Since there is no well developed natural patriotism in Iran, Iranians find refuge in religion under tension, when in other countries people would rally around the flag.”²¹ Although this is a biased oversimplification, it points out a fundamental problem with the Shah-centered nationalism promoted by Reza Shah.²² The former shah had been removed before he could successfully routinize his charisma or otherwise establish his son a viable heir. In the post-1941 political context, a Shah-centered nationalism had little relevance, with Iran still largely under foreign control and the new shah merely a figurehead with no political base. With the irrelevance of Shah-centered nationalism, and the harsh suppression of regional separatist movements after the War, Islam served as a patriotic rallying point in the absence of a strong, unifying center. That is not to say, however, that this was “natural” or that this unifying role was, in any way, an exclusive characteristic of Islam. The Marxist ideals of Tudeh (Iran’s Communist party) provided a similar unifying function and, when a strong political center did emerge with Prime Minister Mosaddeq’s leadership of the oil nationalization movement, Iranians from the Right and the Left were able to (temporarily) rally around him politically, regardless of religious identity.²³

A CHANGE IN LEADERSHIP

Before proceeding further, some attention must be paid to the changes in clerical and political leadership that occurred following the abdication of Reza Shah. The following

²¹ USDS, *Iran, 1945-1949*, Reel 7: 338.

²² See Appendix II.

²³ For more information on the Mosaddeq period, see: Mark Gasiorowski and Malcolm Byrne, ed., *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2004); Homa Katouzian, *Musaddiq and the Struggle for Power in Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1990); and Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*.

sections address the first decade of the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah and the contemporary rise of Hossein Borujerdi to the position of Shi'ism's universal *marja'* (the highest rank of religious authority). This is followed by a discussion of the Cold War context of Islamic activism. Once this context is established, I discuss the emergence of the activist Islamic associations of the 1940s and the push for a united Islamic front.

“I am not a dictator”

[Reza Shah] had little patience with his son, a sickly lad given to daydreaming. One time, the old man came upon the boy standing beside a palace pool. The father asked the boy what he was doing. “Thinking,” replied the crown prince, whereupon his father uttered a roaring curse and kicked his heir into the pool.²⁴

Reza Shah was rarely happy with his son and despised his weakness and lack of nerve. He saw himself reflected more in his daughter Ashraf, who was loud, vivacious, and quick to violence against those who were unfortunate enough to displease her. He was known to often complain, “It’s too bad she was not the boy.”²⁵ Unlike his brave sister, Mohammad Reza was terrified by his father, who would physically and verbally abuse him. Even as an older teenager he still reportedly returned from meetings with his father “trembling, with perspiration dripping down his face.”²⁶

From the age of twelve, Mohammad Reza was educated at the Institut le Rosey boarding school in Rolle, Switzerland, in part to compensate for his father’s lifelong embarrassment at his lack of a formal education. It was this same embarrassment, however, which resulted in the young heir being yanked back to Iran in 1935 after he got into a fight with an American student who had made fun of his father’s reported

²⁴ Anderson and Whitten, “CIA Study Finds Shah Insecure,” *Washington Post*, July 11, 1975.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 11: 102.

illiteracy.²⁷ Mohammad Reza was pleased to return to Iran, since he had been utterly miserable in his boarding school. “My friends were having fun,” he later reminisced, “laughing and dancing while I was sitting alone in my room... I had a radio and gramophone to keep me company, but what fun were they compared with the festivities my friends enjoyed.”²⁸

According to his close friend, Asadollah Alam, Mohammad Reza thought that, due to his trauma in boarding school, “he may have grown up with some sort of complex.”²⁹ While at boarding school, he was strictly monitored by his tutor, Dr. Nafici, was allowed no social life, and had no friends except for Ernest Perron. Perron was the son of a gardener and ten years older than the prince. Mohammad Reza insisted on bringing Perron with him when he returned to Iran, and he stayed extremely close to Perron for nearly two decades.³⁰ Perron’s long-term, intimate relationship with the Shah was a subject of controversy, as he was “decidedly homosexual.”³¹ Queen Soraya later recalled angrily that this “Persian Rasputin,” who “was as slippery as an eel,” played a “sinister role” in the Court. The nature of his relationship with the Shah was kept so private that Soraya related that “even I, as Empress, never really managed to unravel this man’s relationship with the Shah.” She notes that Perron “visited him [the Shah] each morning in his bedroom,” ostensibly to discuss business.³²

²⁷ NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 16 / 04 / Box 5, April 9, 1936.

²⁸ Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, *Mission for My Country* (London: Hutchinson, 1960), p. 62.

²⁹ Asadollah Alam, *The Shah and I: The Confidential Diary of Iran’s Royal Court, 1969-1977*, ed. Alinaghi Alikhani (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1992), p. 364.

³⁰ When the Shah began to assume political control of Iran in the mid-1950s, he had to break his close ties and frequent private encounters with Perron, due to rumors that they were lovers and the need to project a more masculine, independent image as he made his bid for power (USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 11: 100-101).

³¹ Abbas Milani, *The Shah* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), pp. 49, 158.

³² Soraya Esfandiary-Bakhtiari, *Soraya, the Autobiography of Her Imperial Highness* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1964), pp. 73-74.

After his return to Iran, Mohammad Reza was pampered and given a military education that was superficial at best. Because of the fear and deference shown to the Shah, the crown prince was pampered and above critique. He, for example, received the highest marks in his secondary school exams despite being described as having average intelligence.³³ This environment cultivated in Mohammad Reza an inflated sense of self and a false confidence in the breadth of his knowledge and skills. This can be seen in the Shah's pride in his ability as a pilot, despite his evident lack of ability and a crash that was due to rank incompetence.³⁴

No one was confident in Mohammad Reza's ability to lead after his father. Even before anyone contemplated an Allied invasion, there was a great deal of anxiety over Reza Shah's health and what his death would mean for Iran. It was felt that the crown prince was out of touch with Iran and not prepared to rule. When the abdication came, this lack of confidence could be seen, for example, in the outgoing Shah's last advice to Ashraf and the new Shah. He instructed his favorite child, Ashraf, to look after her twin brother and make sure he did not fail, while he told Mohammad Reza to "fear nothing," i.e. to toughen up.³⁵

After becoming shah, Mohammad Reza kept a low profile and left important decisions to foreign advisors and elder statesmen such as Hossein Ala. He transferred many royal possessions back to the state and acquiesced to the pressure he was under to stay out of the way of the politicians and play the role of a constitutional monarch. The constitution of 1906 favors the majles (parliament) over the Shah and, although largely sidelined by Reza Shah, after 1941 the majles was gradually revived as a real centre of

³³ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 27188, Tehran intelligence summary, 1941.

³⁴ USDS, *Iran, 1945-1949*, Reel 5: 703-04.

³⁵ Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, *Answer to History* (New York: Stein and Day, 1980), p. 43.

power in Iran. While others saw to affairs of state, the Shah spent his days “riding horses, flying planes, speeding around in fast cars, and chasing women.” In this period, he was described as having “a weak, retiring personality” combined with “an enormous inferiority complex.” His effete reputation at the time was such that, when his appendix was removed, it was joked that “now the Shah has no guts at all.”³⁶

The Shah’s laissez-faire attitude towards politics infuriated his family, who knew that their collective fortunes as a royal dynasty were linked to the fate of their new patriarch. He was, therefore, “constantly harassed by his mother and Princess Ashraf to assert himself in the tradition of his father.” Those aware of what was happening behind palace walls note that the Queen Mother “is aggressive, assertive and... is constantly telling the Shah how far short he falls of filling the shoes of his late father; how much better his brother Ali could do things.” She was “everlastingly egging him on to assert himself and his imperial prerogatives.” The Shah’s first wife was also highly critical of him, leading the Iranian press to blame “female domination” for his weakness and to ask, “How can a man who fails to manage his wife be expected to manage the country?”³⁷

His brothers were also critical. When a radical Islamic group (the Feda’iyan-e Islam) assassinated the Minister of Court in 1949, for example, Prince Abdul-Reza, called on the Shah to “crush reactionary religious elements as did Reza Shah.” The prince believed that the assassination was an ideal excuse for the return of their father’s much-vaunted “iron fist,” and that crushing the ulama was a prerequisite for Iran’s progress, but that his brother was too weak to do what needed to be done.³⁸

³⁶ Anderson and Whitten, “CIA Study”.

³⁷ USDS, *Iran, 1945-1949*, Reel 5: 612, 828.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 150.

In 1942, only months after Reza Shah's abdication, the British expressed doubt about how much support they should place behind the new shah:

We backed the last shah through thick and thin and the results were not good. Reza took advantage of our complete acquiescence in one-man rule, with the result that for many years we were entirely out of contact with the Persian Government, because he refused to see us. The more we cultivate royalty now, the more we risk sliding back to that unfortunate state of affairs.³⁹

By 1943, after having more than a year to observe the Shah, the British expressed misgivings about whether or not Mohammad Reza should be retained in any capacity whatsoever. He was seen to be mentally unstable, vacillating, stubborn, and suffering the same obsession with keeping up with Turkey that hounded his father. It was felt that he should be prevented from assuming dictatorial control for some time because of his youth and unstable personality.⁴⁰ The Shah himself was not opposed to this relegation to a constitutional role, saying:

I am not a dictator. I am fundamentally and absolutely a democrat. I would sooner be a private citizen than shah of an unhappy Iran. If I could find a noble-souled, pure-minded, patriotic Persian who could take care of this unfortunate realm I would gladly stand down and make my way for him.⁴¹

This half-hearted desire to abdicate (qualified by what he saw as an impossible condition) was not altogether surprising. The account below, from his school years, also reveals his desire to be free of the weight of what was expected of him:

In the wilderness years of his youth, the Shah once asked friends at a party what profession each of them wished they could pursue. The replies were ribald and amusing until it came to the Shah's turn. Had he not been a king, he said, he would have liked to be public servant, earning enough money to indulge his

³⁹ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1407 / 9 / 5A / 42, Confidential Minutes, April 15, 1942.

⁴⁰ Ibid., FO 248 / 1426 / "Shah, Mohammed Reza" (1943).

⁴¹ Ibid.

passion for sports. He then went on to make a significant remark, one that runs true to form: he would prefer a job that spared him from the burden of decision-making.⁴²

After the conclusion of the War, although he was approaching thirty, the Shah was described as an adult child who, despite ostensibly ruling Iran, was limited by curfews, and clearly saw his American “advisors” as his new parental figures. British observers noted that he was treated “rather like a naughty though privileged child.”⁴³ He complained bitterly to them of his curfew and whined that in Egypt his counterpart Farouk was able to go to nightclubs until all hours and it was unfair that he could not do the same.⁴⁴

This youthful energy was, in part, diverted to his great enthusiasm for flying. A major who flew with the Shah angrily relayed that, despite nominal hours of training, the Shah imagined himself skilled and no one dared contradict him, although he is “exceedingly reckless and is by no means a good pilot.” On one occasion, the Shah “cut his face badly” in a “bumpy landing” (i.e. crash) but, rather than admit this failure, he told American contacts that he acquired the injuries from accidentally running into a door. Despite this incident, his enthusiasm was not dampened in the slightest and he grew annoyed when diplomats came up with any excuse available not to accompany him on his flights.⁴⁵

He devoted so much time to diversions and so little attention to affairs of state, that it was observed that the Shah had basically abandoned politics and

⁴² Alam, *The Shah and I*, pp. 22-23.

⁴³ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 91466, Tehran to FO, December 10, 1951.

⁴⁴ NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 20 / 07 / Box 2 / Folder 800.1 1946, June 18, 1946.

⁴⁵ USDS, *Iran, 1945-1949*, Reel 5: 703.

As far as I can tell from the short time I have been here, the Shah cuts little ice nowadays. If he does not live like a monk, his life is a very retiring one, and he seems to have more or less thrown in the sponge. This is a great pity. The idea of Kingship still cuts a great deal of ice in this backward and, in parts, still feudally minded, country. The best form of insurance against violent revolution would be for the throne to be a central pillar around which reform and progress could slowly and more surely be built up, a rallying point for patriotic elements and a more titular head to which the Army could look. The trouble is that this well-educated, pleasant mannered and good intentioned youth will not be consistent or courageous enough to exert his influence where the exertion of it is both constitutional and expedient.⁴⁶

The author of the report notes that the Shah “was obviously worrying about his future” and that he tried to remove the young Shah’s “defeatist ideas about the end of all regimes of Constitutional Monarchy” by reminding him that it still persisted in Greece and elsewhere. The Shah replied that it

was almost impossible to be a constitutional ruler in this country. I said that a dictatorship was impossible. He agreed, but the people here were funny and would expect action of some sort. I said that to hide in his palace was the worst sort of inaction.⁴⁷

The Shah ignored this counsel and continued to isolate himself in his palaces and largely avoided the social and official interactions expected of his position. It was felt that he was excessively timid and that he had allowed the institution that his father had built to be reduced to a relatively insignificant intermediary between the interests of an ambitious Prime Minister and a “vindictive and domineering mother.”⁴⁸ In the view of the British, “Persians like to be led: and they prefer a strong bad leader to a weak good one,” but no one believed that the Shah had the strength required to lead Iran.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 52731 / E 3683, “Position of Shah,” April 16, 1946.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., FO 371 / 133006 / EP 1015 / 50, Russel to FO, September 30, 1958.

By 1948, however, the Shah grew depressed and unsatisfied remaining on the political periphery and began to want to take a more active role. He tried to share his military insights with his American advisors, but was mocked behind his back and considered a clueless dolt. His desire to gain a more active role in managing Iran was noted, but dismissed.⁵⁰ The American ambassador thought that the Shah was hopelessly sad and lonely and prone to imagine into existence even more problems than he already had. To this end, it was hoped that the Shah's planned 1949 visit to America would prove be a useful tool to re-impress upon him the need for constancy, since "It will be most important to keep the Shah on the beam."

It must be remembered that he was unhappily married to a most beautiful woman. His life is extraordinarily solitary; in addition he is a hypochondriac; as nouveau royal, he has immured himself and the entire royal family into strict court protocol and within his family, relations are not too happy. This is not unusual in Asiatic dynasties, whether new or old... The Shah himself is weak, frustrated, suspicious, lonely and proud; a young man who lives in the shadow of his father... The attitude and actions of the Shah are dominated by an egocentric concentration on his own position and the preservation of the dynasty. He jealously seeks power; so far he has manifested no capacity to exercise it in a constructive manner... A strong man technique might not be altogether bad at this stage of the game were the Shah really strong. Unfortunately he lacks the ability to lead. Moreover, he appears to be an extremely bad judge of men. Most important of all, he has no conception of how to be an executive.⁵¹

The Shah was described as unflappably paranoid that he would either be replaced by his foreign patrons or die through assassination or illness. He was "very worried about his health" and it was anticipated that, due to his hypochondria, while in America he would require a complete check up and "perhaps an operation," which he did not really need.⁵² Thirty years later, the Shah would fall victim to the ravages of cancer, but

⁵⁰ NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 20 / 07 / Box 1, Top Secret Files - 1948, December 17, 1948.

⁵¹ USDS, *Iran, 1945-1949*, Reel 5: 830.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 826.

for decades he had been so paranoid over conditions and threats that were in his own head that this led outside observers to slowly become numb to such rumors and to ascribe them to the Shah's penchant for the dramatic.

This hypochondria was not new. As a child the Shah was inexplicably sick very often. He later credited divine intervention with healing him for an important fate. The Hand of God was also credited for saving him at several other crucial moments later in life. When he fell, but luckily avoided smashing his head on a rock, in his mind it was God's doing. When he survived a plane crash, and numerous assassination attempts, it was all perceived as due to divine intervention.⁵³ His narcissism was so deep that not only did he believe that God singled him out for a great destiny, but he also felt that God was in constant communication with him and guided him. Much later, he claimed that he was not "entirely alone" since

... a force others can't perceive accompanies me. My mystical force. Moreover, I receive messages. I have lived with God beside me since I was 5 years old. Since, that is, God sent me those visions... You don't believe in God and you don't believe in me. Lots of people don't. Even my father didn't believe me. He never did and laughed about it.⁵⁴

This exaggerated sense of self and narcissistic view of reality was mixed with self-hatred and a pronounced lack of self-esteem, which led to a fractured sense of self. He saw his public persona as a separate character from himself, a role that he played. Close friends have reported that when the Shah assumed his public face it was like he was doing an impersonation, with even his posture and gait transforming to play the role he had been raised to play. Despite the successful portrayal of this public character, in private the Shah

⁵³ See, for example, USDS, *Iran, 1960-1962*, Reel 4: 134.

⁵⁴ "The Mystically Divine Shah of Iran," *The Chicago Tribune*, December 30, 1973.

was constantly haunted by ghostly memories of his father—“awesome and frightening”⁵⁵—laughing at his failures and weakness. He was caught in the predicament of needing to prove his father’s assessment of him wrong despite having internalized the belief that his father was actually correct about him.

The desire to live up to his idealized father was frustrated not only by his personal insecurities, but by the inherent contradiction of what was expected of him. His father desired that he be European in education, manners, and thought, while at the same time possessing the rugged strength and characteristics of leadership that Reza Shah had achieved through his military background. This was made all the more impracticable given that Mohammad Reza’s European socialization privileged democracy and liberalism and portrayed his father’s political style as brutish and despotic. As a result, the Shah spent his life trying to prove to his father that he could follow in his footsteps, while simultaneously trying to convince his foreign father figures that he was nothing like his father. The two projects were, of course, mutually defeating.

This fundamental conflict can be seen in the following conversation with a British representative. At first, the Shah claims that he has “no desire, nor capacity, to imitate his [father’s] methods” as he “hated dictatorship and government by violence was alien to his nature,” and was not even an option, as “he could never pretend to be something which he was not.” Despite these liberal sentiments, later in the same conversation he angrily defended his father’s methods, claiming that “if he had occasionally kicked

⁵⁵ Ashraf Pahlavi, *Faces in the Mirror: Memoirs from Exile* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1980), p. 9.

people with his jack boot that was because it would have been impossible otherwise to get anything effectively done in this country.”⁵⁶

The American ambassador to Iran, while briefing President Truman on the Shah before his visit, highlighted the conflict between trying to emulate his “brute,” “illiterate” father while also living up to the Western expectation that he would be a “liberal monarch.” In the ambassador’s analysis, it was noted that although, for the most part, the Shah “has become more European than Eastern,” he could not relate to people from either group, always felt “terribly alone,” and “is on the whole extremely serious... [and suffers] from an inferiority complex.”

He is filled with many complexes, which is entirely understandable... He, in some curious Freudian way, is dedicated to the vindication of his father’s memory. His mother constantly irritates his sensibilities by insisting to him that he falls far short of filling his late father’s shoes; that in comparison he is a weakling.⁵⁷

In this American assessment, the Shah is categorized according to an Orientalist binary, consisting of the effete ruler and the savage despot.⁵⁸ The new, “weakling” Shah is placed in the first category, while his father is placed in the latter category, and described as a “ruthless” and “cruel” despot who, with “ruthlessness and singleness of purpose,” overthrew the effeminate final Qajar ruler who preceded him.

The report further observes that while Reza Shah tried to instill his personality in his son, all Mohammad Reza inherited was a “predilection for grandiose plans, extravagant speeches, and fine facades with little genuine understanding or interest in the

⁵⁶ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 82312, EP 1016 / 76, Memo of conversation, September 6, 1950.

⁵⁷ USDS, *Iran, 1945-1949*, Reel 6: 9.

⁵⁸ The role of Orientalism in Iranian-American relations is touched on in subsequent chapters, especially Chapter VI, but a detailed treatment is beyond the scope of the present work. For Orientalism, see: Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978); Lisa Lowe, *Critical Terrains: French and British Orientalisms* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991); and Zachary Lockman, *Contending Visions of the Middle East: The History and Politics of Orientalism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

factors which constitute and maintain firm foundations,” as well as “the exaggerated Iranian sensitivity to criticism or unfavorable comparison.”⁵⁹

In 1949—as the Shah showed increasing interest in playing a larger role in leading Iran militarily—he was reported to be “extremely touchy” about the denial of high-end military aid and the general American position that, in the event of a Soviet invasion, Iran could not defend itself and would have to be allowed to fall, to be liberated later by Western forces. The Shah, to American amusement, considered himself a master military strategist and repeatedly pressed the case that, if he was given enough military aid, Iran could hold back the Soviets through a strategy he personally devised, making use of mountain cover and guerrilla warfare. The Truman administration’s position was that, since Iran could not realistically defend itself from a Soviet assault, the best option in Iran was not military but political and economic, encouraging reforms that would drain the pool of popular support for the Communist alternative. Given the resoluteness of Truman’s position, the Shah insisted that he still needed heavy-duty military weapons since, even if the focus was on reform not defense, “the maintenance of internal security must precede steps toward economic and social development.”⁶⁰

Truman was advised to simply listen quietly and not respond whenever the Shah pressed his military strategies and theories. For, “The Shah considers himself a qualified strategist and tactician and would be mortally offended if he were to be bluntly contradicted in a matter of opinion on military matters.” It was also suggested that, since

⁵⁹ USDS, *Iran, 1945-1949*, Reel 5: 611.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 625.

the desire for the latest tanks “amounts to an obsession with the Shah,” if possible, “it may be desirable to let him have some for political reasons alone.”⁶¹

The Shah’s desire for a strong army had very little to do with the Soviets and was, instead, a continuation of his father’s rivalry with Turkey. Like his father, he wanted to keep up with his neighbors but, unlike his father, he was motivated more by fear rather than envy. It was reported that the Shah “has a strange notion that Turkey constitutes a menace to Iran.” He claimed that the Soviet threat would eventually fade and Turkey would then use its superior Cold War armaments to invade Iran.⁶²

When pressed to carry out reforms as part of the aforementioned plan to weaken the appeal of Communism, the Shah claimed that he lacked the power to enact reforms from above, without concern for the majles, as his father had done. He felt that he would need autocratic control in order to carry out the deep restructuring of society that Truman desired.⁶³

At the end of the 1940s, the Shah’s itch to increase his role in leading Iran could also be seen in his initial efforts to replace or discipline the old elite, from the Reza Shah period, who looked down on him and referred to him derisively as “that boy.”⁶⁴ Starting in 1947, the Shah sought to purge this disrespectful old guard from the military and government. He was encouraged in this by a new generation of ambitious politicians, like General Razmara, who “played upon the Shah’s desire” for affirmation by lauding his military strategies and ambitions.⁶⁵ By manipulating and shaping the Shah’s vague desire for a bigger and better army, Razmara was able to facilitate his own ascent while

⁶¹ Ibid., 635.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid., 616, 830.

⁶⁴ NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 20 / 03 / Box 8 / Folder 350 – Isfahan, July 11, 1955.

⁶⁵ USDS, *Iran, 1945-1949*, Reel 5: 615, 830.

shunting the old Cossack elite who could or would not play a sycophantic role before the young Shah. He rose to become the Shah's muscle and his right-hand man, while all the while secretly harboring the ambition "to be THE strong man" in Iran.⁶⁶ The Shah's Minister of Court (Hazhir) performed a similar role on the civilian side, rooting out the old guard who were not loyal to the Shah.

These processes accelerated following the attempted assassination of the Shah in early 1949. This incident was used by the Shah as an excuse to expand his powers vis-à-vis the majles—and to enhance the importance of his patronage—by establishing a second house of parliament in which he appointed members, and by reclaiming the royal prerogative to dissolve parliament. His "miraculous" survival of the assassination attempt was also taken by the Shah as a sign from God that he was chosen for a great destiny.⁶⁷ This fed into his narcissism and seems to have allowed him to overcome his fear that death was imminent. As the Shah began to angle for more power, this was described as like "a child holding a 6-chamber revolver."⁶⁸

Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi

In this period, the Shi'ite clerical hierarchy was based in Qom under the leadership of Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi (1875-1961). Traditionally, Iraq had been the center of Shi'ite scholarship, but Qom became an important center of learning due to the efforts of Grand Ayatollah Ha'eri-Yazdi (1859-1937). After his death in 1937, Borujerdi was able to revive the importance of Qom's *hawza* (Shi'ite seminary) in the post-War period. When Grand Ayatollah Isfahani died in Najaf in 1946, Borujerdi became Shi'ism's

⁶⁶ Ibid., 635.

⁶⁷ Ibid., *Iran, 1960-1962*, Reel 4: 134.

⁶⁸ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 82312, EP 1016 / 64, Memo of conversation, July 3, 1950.

preeminent *marja'* (source of religious authority to be emulated) and he maintained this position virtually unchallenged until his death in 1961. No one since Borujerdi—Khomeini included—has been able to become a “universal” *marja'*.⁶⁹

Despite his authority, Borujerdi was sickly, elderly (he did not become the most important leader of the Shi'ite world until he was in his seventies), and generally incapable of travel or extended exertion. In this early period, he maintained the methodology of Grand Ayatollah Haeri, who had soured on politics during the Constitutional Revolution and was willing to work with various regimes, having met with both Ahmad Shah Qajar and Reza Khan. Unlike Ha'eri, Borujerdi's “quietism” was more pragmatic than ideological. Earlier in his life, Borujerdi had been involved in clerical opposition to Reza Shah over the issue of conscription of religious students. He protested against Reza Shah from the safety of Iraq, and was imprisoned for this for several months upon his return to Iran. There is little doubt of his opposition to Reza Shah, but his period of leadership began after Reza Shah's death, when the new Shah was a mere youth who had little role in directing the state. It is therefore not surprising that Borujerdi had little initial opposition to Mohammad Reza Shah, especially in light of the new Shah's rejection of his father's religious policies, and the more pressing issue of the Communist threat.

Borujerdi and his generation were not opposed to monarchy in general, just Reza Shah in particular, due to his religious policies. No prominent cleric in this period opposed monarchy in general, despite the widespread vitriol for Reza Shah and his policies. It is impossible to overstate how much Khomeini's later proclamation that Islam and monarchy are incompatible runs counter to Shi'ite tradition over the last few

⁶⁹ Mottahedeh, *The Mantle of the Prophet*, p.231.

hundred years.⁷⁰ Due to the tendency to see the Court-clergy dynamic of earlier periods in light of later, post-Khomeini norms, there has been a false desire to bifurcate earlier generations of clerics and label them as either “revolutionary” (proto-Khomeinists) or “quietist” (enablers of royalist rule). This is a false and ahistorical dichotomy.

Borujerdi was politically involved and looked after the clergy’s corporate interests, which were generally in concert with those of the Shah in the early period of his leadership, but which became increasingly out of synch in the final years of Borujerdi’s life. This exercise of agency in response to changing circumstances should not be mistakenly simplified into collaboration or a pro-Shah orientation. Later, when Mohammad Reza Shah turned against the clergy, after 1955, Borujerdi had little compunction about opposing Mohammad Reza as he had opposed his father.⁷¹ Before this time, however, the Shah did nothing to provoke a lasting break with Borujerdi and, rather, was his ally against the Left. The only serious altercation with Mohammad Reza Shah before 1955 occurred in 1950, when Reza Shah’s embalmed body was paraded around the holy shrine in Qom before going to Tehran. In opposition to this, Borujerdi sanctioned a series of demonstrations and temporarily left for Iraq in protest.⁷²

This personal action was unusual, as Borujerdi usually acted politically through representatives such as Ayatollah Behbahani. As Borujerdi’s political face, Ayatollah Behbahani “controlled a clerical-political machine in Tehran that... was a power in Tehran politics and elections.” At his height, Behbahani had up to fifteen majles deputies

⁷⁰ For an analysis of the thoroughly modern nature of Khomeini’s theocracy, see Juan Cole, “The Modernity of Theocracy,” in *Sacred Space and Holy War: The Politics, Culture and History of Shi’ite Islam* (London: IB Taurus, 2002). For an exploration of Court-clergy relations in the formative Safavid period, see Kathryn Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs: Cultural Landscapes of Early Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002).

⁷¹ See Chapters V and VIII.

⁷² NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 19 / 04 / Box 32, Folder 361.1- Shah, Tehran to State, May 3, 1950.

acting as his representatives, but during the Mosaddeq period his position was threatened by Ayatollah Kashani's ambitions as well as by Prime Minister Mosaddeq himself, "who refused to give him the kickbacks on government contracts and the influence in Parliament to which he felt entitled."⁷³ Since he did not feel respected by Kashani and Mosaddeq, Behbahani became one of the main channels for Western money directed at supporting the Shah and opposing Mosaddeq. Behbahani engaged in all of this with at least the tacit approval of Borujerdi but, by having Behbahani at hand's length, Borujerdi escaped the episode largely unscathed whereas, after the ouster of Mosaddeq, Behbahani's importance slowly declined amid widespread knowledge of the "Behbahani dollars" that had been used in the ousting of Mosaddeq.⁷⁴

Borujerdi's penchant for indirect action can also be seen in his attempt to join forces with the Shah to oppose Tudeh (Iran's Communist party) during the Mosaddeq period. American reports indicate that this partnership was poorly organized, that those involved were not skilled at actions of this type, and that it was eventually called off. Part of the problem was that the Shah had to communicate with Borujerdi through a series of intermediaries, including Tehran's *imam jom'eh* (Friday prayer leader), and communication was therefore quite protracted and inefficient. During these communications, Borujerdi indicated that there was little that he could do directly, short of initiating a *takfir* campaign against Tudeh (declaring that they were apostates deserving of death) and inciting a genocidal witch hunt against them. He had no interest in this and instead felt that indirect actions were preferable and that the Feda'iyan-e Islam terrorist group should be used to battle the Tudeh while the Shah simultaneously made

⁷³ NFAC (CIA), "Islam in Iran," p. 13.

⁷⁴ Gasiorowski, *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran*, p. 338; Richard Cottam, *Nationalism in Iran* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1966), pp. 155, 226.

public and visible moves against them, to which Borujerdi could lend his weighty support.⁷⁵

The Islamic renewal in the context of the Cold War

From the beginning of the Cold War struggle over control of Iran, the ulama were seen as a potential bulwark against Communist expansion southward. They were involved in several early attempts to oppose Communist expansion—some self-initiated and some Western-sponsored—but these early attempts bore few fruits and were mostly significant for highlighting the organizational and propagandistic weaknesses of Shi'ism and the comparative strengths of the Leftist model.

In 1946, for example, the British were hopeful that, due to the manifest dislike that the clergy in Mashhad had for the Soviets, the ulama would be able to mold this sentiment into an organized anti-Communist movement. They soon found that this hope was ill-founded, since the ulama

have not been able so far to rally any conspicuous masses under their banner. They have considerable influence but they lack organization and a practical programme; they have no concrete counter-proposal to offer against Tudeh slogans of bread and employment.⁷⁶

Nevertheless, there were many Western attempts, between 1946 and the early 1950s, to use the ulama as the first line of defense against Communism. To this end, the three main camps of Shi'ite leadership (the clerical establishment under Borujerdi, the “political mullahs” like Kashani and Behbahani, and the Islamic associations discussed

⁷⁵ NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 19 / 04 / Box 42 / Folder 570.3 – Religion, Report by Cuomo, February 1, 1952, and memo of conversation with Tehran's *imam jom'eh*, December 11, 1951.

⁷⁶ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 52707, “Six-monthly Political Situation Report on Khorasan, January-June 1946,” July 1, 1946.

below) were all pulled into the Cold War struggle to win the allegiance of the Iranian masses, especially the all-important demographic of young men. They were more than willing to receive patronage for this struggle, and gain powerful allies, since they already saw Communism as the most significant danger faced by Islam.⁷⁷ The rapid rise of the Left in post-War Iran terrified the elite ulama, such as Ayatollah Borujerdi and Ayatollah Behbahani. They would have been engaged in opposing the threat from the Left even without foreign prompting and assistance. They were worried by the appeal that Leftist groups had for the youth and the clerical hierarchy provided funds for “alternative” religious organizations that would help the youth develop a firm Shi’ite identity that could stand up to the secularizing process and resist the temptation to join Leftist groups like Tudeh.⁷⁸

The British consul-general expressed serious apprehension about the ability of Islam to meet this Cold War need, since “Persians have seemed to me to be groping for something to replace the religion of their fathers.”⁷⁹ Other British diplomats on the ground in Iran shared this apprehension about the usefulness of the ulama in anti-Communist efforts, but this strategy was foisted on them from above. In 1952, for example, Farley warns the Foreign Office that “the value of Islam as an anti-Communist antiseptic has been much exaggerated” and that “in the long run its braking effect on progress and encouragement of xenophobia more than outweighs any value it may have as a specific enemy of Communist parties.”⁸⁰ These objections were noted but ignored.

⁷⁷ Jafarian, *Jaryanha va Sazmanha*, pp. 368-69.

⁷⁸ Abbas Vali and Sami Zubaida, “Factionalism and Political Discourse in the Islamic Republic of Iran: The Case of the Hujjatiyeh Society,” *Economy and Society* vol. 14, no. 2 (1985): p. 148.

⁷⁹ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 82309 / EP 1013 / 42, Tabriz consular report, August 22, 1950.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, FO 371 / 98311 / E 1782 / 3, Quarterly review of Islamic affairs, May 1952.

The Americans were less skeptical about the efficacy of ulama-led “movements” against Communism. In order to prevent the spread of communism in Iran, the CIA worked out of the American embassy from 1947 onwards and carried out a series of covert activities that increased in intensity with Mosaddeq’s rise to power and the subsequent oil “crisis.”⁸¹ Through the CIA’s BEDAMN program (established in 1948) and similar operations, America funneled millions of dollars into the hands of clerics, local agents, and thugs during the late 1940s and early 1950s, in order to undermine the Left and the Mosaddeq government. These American covert operations involved bombing mosques and blaming Tudeh, artificially swelling Tudeh crowds to spread panic, and encouraging the chanting of “Death to the United States” to cause fear of Tudeh back in Washington. This seems to have been partly aimed at influencing the presidential election at home, to ensure that the more interventionist Eisenhower was elected. Indeed, part of the Eisenhower campaign was the promise to prevent Iran becoming a “second China.”⁸²

The program also involved channeling money to Hojjat al-Islam Mohammad Taqi Falsafi—a firebrand close to Borujerdi—to develop a kinetic version of Islam that would appeal to the youth.⁸³ Falsafi was generally considered “the most powerful orator in Iran.”⁸⁴ This was likely the reason why the Americans chose him to create a youth-friendly reboot of Shi’ism, and why Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi later tasked him with convincing the Shah and the masses of the need to deal with the Baha’i minority. In addition to his rhetorical skills, Falsafi was infamous for his political ambition and was

⁸¹ Mark Gasiorowski, *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Shah: Building a Client State in Iran* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 54.

⁸² Pahlavi, *Faces in a Mirror*, p. 134; Gasiorowski, *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Shah*, pp. 70, 82-83.

⁸³ Gasiorowski, *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Shah*, pp. 70-71.

⁸⁴ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 410.

widely eyed as a potential “new Kashani” (Kashan is discussed later in this chapter). Falsafi was tasked by the CIA to develop a “clerical alternative” to the appeal of the Left that would offer Iranians a new version of Shi’ism with a more “fundamentalist line,” which could capture the imagination of the nation’s young men, and which would be firmly against the irreligion of communism.⁸⁵ Towards the end of the Mosaddeq period, when American money was being funneled to amenable clerics to oppose the National Front and assist in the Western-led coup to remove Mosaddeq, Falsafi was part of the group of prominent “political mullahs” involved in toppling Mosaddeq (along with Ayatollah Kashani and Ayatollah Behbahani).⁸⁶

American consular reports shed additional light on the extent of foreign use of ulama as political agents. On March 29, 1955, for example, just weeks before the beginnings of the anti-Baha’i pogrom discussed in later chapters, the American Consul in Mashhad secretly met with Hojjat al-Islam Mohammad Taqi Sebt-e Ashtiani. Ashtiani only agreed to meet with the Americans because he wanted to warn them of the danger of their policy of funding extremist clergy and encouraging radical Islam as a brake on Communism. He was at first indirect, saying only that “foreign powers” were behind this, but by the end of the interview he was directly implicating the Americans. He warned that with this patronage “mullas are cynically playing on the ignorance of the people to advance their own ends.” He saw the type of violent demonstrations of religiosity that this group favored to be a sign not of the “vitality of Islam” but rather of its “bankruptcy.” In his view, Shi’ism itself was threatened by this foreign-inspired and foreign-funded shift to “religious intolerance and superstition.” He said that the ulama’s

⁸⁵ Gasiorowski, *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Shah*, p. 70.

⁸⁶ See, for example, Abrahamian, *Khomeinism*, p. 109.

role as political agents had created a new generation of ulama who were “playing a dangerous game by encouraging unthinking fanaticism.” He advised the Americans that fanaticism is too dangerous to control and should not be used as a tool with which to fight the Cold War. He warned America to get out of this dangerous game, and rightly predicted that, “foreign powers which support reactionary elements in the Moslem world would [soon] find out how shortsighted their policy has been.”⁸⁷

THE “MUSLIM NATION”

A flurry of Islamic societies and associations emerged as a result of the new political openness that followed the removal of Reza Shah. These organizations took advantage of the political freedom of the period, and used it to propagate Islam and to attempt to protect it from perceived threats. These associations and societies included Navvab Safavi’s Feda’iyan-e Islam (Devotees of Islam), Ayatollah Shirazi’s Hezb-e Baradaran (Brotherhood Party), the Anjoman-e Tablighat-e Islami (Islamic Propagation Association),⁸⁸ the Jami‘at-e Ta‘limat-e Islami (Society for Islamic Teachings),⁸⁹ and

⁸⁷ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 305-07. In the same period, Tehran’s *imam jom’eh* gave a similar warning to the British, denouncing the “silly and dangerous game” that the CIA was engaging in by throwing money at radical religious leaders without regard for future complications (TNAPRO, FO 371 / 133060 / EP 1781 / 1, Memo of conversation, May 15, 1958.).

⁸⁸ This Association was founded in 1941 and espoused an exclusivist interpretation of Islam that actively denigrated all other religions and attempted to promote Islam among the masses. As part of these efforts, it published material that simplified Islamic teachings to make them more accessible to the masses. The Association was fiercely anti-Baha’i and was especially active in publishing anti-Baha’i polemic (Tavakoli-Targhi, “Anti-Baha’ism and Islamism in Iran,” p 205). From the 1950s, it operated largely via the Hojjatiyeh Society, discussed in Chapter VIII .

⁸⁹ This society was founded in 1943 and sought to safeguard and promote Islam through education. To achieve this, it opened hundreds of educational institutions and trained thousands of students. The educational efforts of members of this society were in direct competition with those of the Baha’is, which they perceived as proselytization to deceive the “simple-minded.” The Association devoted itself to preventing this by ensuring that those who had been denied an education and a proper training in Islam would no longer be neglected and subsequently fall prey to Baha’i recruitment, be led astray and “forget who they are.” They received support from the clerical establishment for this competition against the Baha’is for the rural hearts and minds, and hoped to establish institutions of Islamic learning in every town

many more.⁹⁰ The two associations most important for our purposes are the Brotherhood Party and the Feda'iyan-e Islam.

The Brotherhood Party

The Brotherhood Party (Hezb-e Baradaran) is one of the earliest Islamic associations and one of the associations that is most important in terms of the larger threads of this study. It was formed by Ayatollah Nureddin Shirazi (1895/6-1957) in order to create a united and disciplined defense of Islam. He created an early version of the Brotherhood Party (also known as the Hezb-e Nur, or Party of Light) in 1313 (1934/5) as a “defensive, religious line” against the Left.⁹¹ It was secretly formed, due to the restrictions of the Reza Shah period, and received little interest or notice at the time. According to Shirazi, he was “sowing seeds” but “no results were evident.”⁹² Nevertheless, he persisted in his Islamic propagation efforts in Shiraz, which led to short exiles for his opposition to Reza Shah’s religious policies.⁹³

Following the 20th of Shahrivar [the end of Reza Shah’s rule], Shirazi became intensely involved in Islamic activism in Shiraz, slowly becoming the most prominent cleric in the city, a position that he held until his death in early 1957. The Brotherhood Party also greatly increased its activities following Reza Shah’s abdication and gained wide popularity within a few years. This expansion was facilitated, in part, by Shirazi’s efforts to take advantage of the new freedom to openly establish religious organizations

so as to safeguard against the Baha’i threat (Tavakoli-Targhi, “Anti-Baha’ism and Islamism in Iran,” pp 206-09.).

⁹⁰ The Hojjatiyeh Society is also important for our purposes, but it was not formed until 1953 and is discussed in Chapter VIII.

⁹¹ Jafarian, *Jaryanha va Sazmanha*, p. 114.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 115.

and committees. He formed more than a dozen of these within Shiraz alone. According to a July, 1951 report from the region's governor-general, Shirazi had also won the allegiance of the bazaar, and his Brotherhood ruled political opinion in Shiraz.⁹⁴

Those who pledged their allegiance to Shirazi were supposed to be spiritually renewed and born again in order to enter the Brotherhood. Even for Shirazi himself, there was a noted division between his life in the Brotherhood and "my previous life" (*jan-e gozashteh-ye man*).⁹⁵ To join the Brotherhood, one had to pledge, "I swear before God to join with you, my brothers, in protecting the independence of Iran, under the shadow of the Ja'fari sect [i.e. Twelver Shi'ism]."⁹⁶ Through this sacrament, one was sworn into a secretive fraternal order dedicated to a sacred, national cause.

The details of this mission are explained in the group's manifesto. The first article is very similar to the oath and calls for "the protection of the national unity (*hefz-e vahdat-e melli*) of Iran and the expansion (*tawse'eh*) of the Ja'fari sect." The second article calls for "the implementation of the [constitutional] laws relating to Islam (*qanun-e Islami*), in particular the supervision of the ulama." Other articles include opposition to superstition, protecting Iran's territorial integrity, utilizing Iran's national resources, the struggle against despotism wherever it arises, and various calls relating to the need for combating ignorance and promoting public education on orderliness, hygiene and other matters.

The second article of their manifesto is a reference to the first two articles of the Supplementary Fundamental Laws of 1907, especially the unimplemented second article, which called for a committee of ulama to veto legislation deemed to be anti-Islamic.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 114.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

Shirazi explicitly confirmed his desire to implement these laws when he claimed that “complete unity between the state and the nation (*mellat*) of Iran can only be brought about through the implementation of the second article of the Supplementary Fundamental Laws.”⁹⁷

The Brotherhood Party was aimed at the “mobilization (*basij*) of the religious population” of Shiraz “against the members of Tudeh and others groups,” which was framed as the first step of a movement to rescue all of Iran.⁹⁸ A major aspect of this effort involved forming a scholarly council (*hay’at-e ‘elmiyyeh*) and “uniting the clerical factions” of the city.⁹⁹ Shirazi dedicated himself to this “unification of the clerics of Shiraz” and was, for example, the prime mover behind the formation of the Clerical Society (*Jami’at-e Rohaniyyat*). His hope was that, “beginning from Fars,” there would emerge “a single, strong, unified front of the 14 million Shi’a of the Ja’fari sect [i.e. Twelver Shi’ism].”¹⁰⁰

He described his efforts as the beginning of the “regeneration (*tajaddad*) of Iran” following its decline under Reza Shah.¹⁰¹ In his opinion, Iran “should presently be ranked equal to the developed nations of the world. Instead, it is, unfortunately, left behind in this point of degradation.”¹⁰² He blamed this sorry state of affairs on the corruption of its bureaucracy, which left Iran as a damaged structure sorely in need of repair.¹⁰³ In light of his supposed role as national savior, Shirazi was referred to by his

⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 115-16.

⁹⁸ Ibid., pp. 116-17.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 116.

¹⁰⁰ *Golestan-e Shiraz*, 13 Khordad 1325 [June 3, 1946].

¹⁰¹ Jafarian, *Jaryanha va Sazmanha*, p. 117.

¹⁰² Ibid.

¹⁰³ Ibid., pp. 116-17.

followers as “the Imam” (a highly elevated, somewhat millenarian title that was later used to refer to Khomeini).¹⁰⁴

Shirazi’s activities extended beyond his city and, in order to further his national aspirations, he even spent his own money to widely distribute his writings across Iran.¹⁰⁵ As part of this self-promotion, he used a 1948 pilgrimage to Mashhad to promote the Brotherhood and the unification of Islamic factions. He set out with an entourage of 500 supporters and made stops in several cities. He was received warmly in Isfahan, Tehran, and elsewhere by the ulama and by Islamic associations such as the Anjoman-e Tablighat-e Islami. In Qom, Ayatollah Borujerdi even met him personally. He also used the trip to lobby the majles to take action to ban the sale of alcohol, calling upon supportive majles deputies to resign if this was not achieved. In his speeches in this regard, he spoke of the need for the government to follow the will of the “Muslim nation.”¹⁰⁶

While in Tehran, he also argued that it was not permitted to be complacent in the face of tyranny and, when the situation demanded it, he claimed that “it is necessary to rise up and take action (*eqdam va qiyam nemudan*).”¹⁰⁷ In his view, Iran was in ruins because Muslims were thinking as individuals and not as a nation, and individual action in fulfillment of one’s religious duty to rise up did not produce results. In order for change to occur, believers must become disciplined and turn towards one goal so that what the individual could not accomplish would instead be achieved through the “cooperation and like-mindedness of the Muslims.” To assist in this galvanizing of the

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., pp. 117-18.

¹⁰⁶ *Parcham-e Islam*, 23-27 Ordibehesht, 1327 [May 13-17, 1948]; Jafarian, *Jaryanha va Sazmanha*, pp. 117-19.

¹⁰⁷ Jafarian, *Jaryanha va Sazmanha*, p. 119.

community, he claimed to have opened a branch of the Brotherhood in each city for those who answer the call to “cooperate together to safeguard the independence of Iran under the banner of the Ja’fari sect.”¹⁰⁸

The official publication of the Brotherhood Party was *A’in-e Baradari*. It was supported in its efforts by several complimentary publications, among which was *Mehr-e Izad*, which was similar to *A’in-e Islam* and *Donya-ye Islam*, to which Shirazi also contributed. He wrote many articles himself, which were often serialized, and which largely concerned Islamic society (*jam’eh-ye Islami*) and the differences between “national” governments (i.e. those which expressed the will of the “Muslim nation”) and despotic governments.¹⁰⁹

During the Mosaddeq period, Shirazi was initially a strong supporter of the Prime Minister, due to oil nationalization, and urged his followers to support him and to pray for his success.¹¹⁰ He later became disillusioned, however, withdrawing his support for Mosaddeq and instead opposing him intensely. This was largely due to Mosaddeq’s failure to Islamicize Iran. Shirazi believed that it was the government’s job to oversee the renewal of Islam—especially among the younger generation—in order that that “their evaporated faith is restored to them.”¹¹¹ He also opposed Mosaddeq’s ties to Tudeh, since the Brotherhood was fiercely opposed to the Left, the Baha’is, and the intellectuals (specifically Ahmad Kasravi).¹¹² The Brotherhood Party’s post-Mosaddeq activities are covered in Chapter V.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., pp 118-19.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 120.

¹¹¹ Ibid., pp 121-22.

¹¹² Bahram Choubine, *Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq va Baha’ian* (Los Angeles: Ketab Corp., 2009) p. 13.

The Feda'iyān-e Islam

The Feda'iyān-e Islam (“Devotees of Islam”) was founded in 1946 by Mojtaba Mir-Lowhi (1924-55), later known as Navvab Safavi. Like the military wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, which began in Egypt nearly two decades earlier, the Feda'iyān-e Islam was xenophobic and amenable to the use of violence and assassination in order to advance a radical Islamic agenda. As with the Egyptian Brotherhood, the Feda'iyān was founded by an individual from a traditional background who became radicalized in reaction to the rapid pace at which he saw his society, and especially his fellow youth, abandon religion, while the established religious authorities did little to actively tackle this trend.¹¹³

The Egyptian Brotherhood’s founder, Hassan al-Banna, came from a conservative, rural family and his father worked as a teacher and prayer leader at the local mosque. As a teenager, he came to Cairo to study and, after completing his studies, he went to work as a school teacher in Ismailia, a city in the Suez Canal area in which there was at the time a significant foreign presence and influence. In Cairo, al-Banna had been disturbed by his generation’s drift away from Islam and was upset at the failure of the Islamic scholars at al-Azhar to respond to the rising tide of atheism and foreign influence. His anxieties increased in Ismailia, where he was disturbed by the British military presence, foreign economic domination, and the luxuries enjoyed by foreigners while

¹¹³ For the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, see: Richard Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) and Brynjar Lia, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers in Egypt: The Rise of an Islamic Mass Movement, 1928-1942* (Reading: Ithaca press, 2006). For the Feda'iyān-e Islam, see: Adele Ferdows, “Religion in Iranian Nationalism: The Study of the Fedayan-i Islam” (Ph.D. Diss., Indiana University, 1967); Sohrab Behdad, “Islamic Utopia in pre-Revolutionary Iran: Navvab Safavi and the Fada'ian-e Eslām,” in *Iran: Between Tradition and Modernity*, ed. Ramin Jahanbegloo (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004), pp. 71-94; and Davud Amini, *Jam'iyat-e Feda'iyān-i Eslām va Naqsh-e An dar Tahavvulat-e Siyasi-e Ejtema'i-e Iran* (Tehran: Entesharat-e Markaz-e Esnad-e Enqelab-e Eslami-e Iran, 2002).

local Egyptians struggled to survive. He rejected the complacency of the religious establishment, and instead developed a more radical, kinetic, and youthful interpretation of Islam that drew organizational inspiration from Sufism while, ironically, rejecting all such later accretions and hybridizations, instead calling for a return to the undiluted Islam of the original Muslim community. Al-Banna was able to expand his movement across Egypt within a decade and, by the time he was murdered in 1949, he had approximately half a million followers and had established an organization that continued to grow and expand after his death, both within Egypt and across the Sunni Muslim world.¹¹⁴

Navvab Safavi's story has a similar beginning but a very different ending. Like al-Banna, Safavi came from a conservative background. He also studied at a modern educational institution (a German vocational school) before working in one of the areas of his country with the most pronounced Western presence (Abadan). Likewise, in his youth he founded and became the charismatic leader of a kinetic, violent reimagining of Islam. He too expressed outrage at the drift towards secularism and atheism and employed violence against governmental figures to affect change. The Shi'ite clerical establishment in Iran felt the barbs of the Feda'iyan just as the establishment at al-Azhar received the attacks of the Muslim Brotherhood. Both organizations had secret military wings and both organizations had utopian fantasies and messianic characteristics.

It was Safavi's negative experiences in Abadan that caused him to re-imagine himself and to choose a new life path. He quit his job working for the British and departed for Iraq. He returned shortly thereafter wearing religious garb and had apparently been inspired by the teachings of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ Mitchell, *The Society of the Muslim Brothers*, p. 328.

¹¹⁵ NFAC (CIA), "Islam in Iran," p. 25.

Despite his lack of religious training, he was “a spellbinding speaker whose ability to attract a following from among the uneducated masses was phenomenal.” He was completely devoted to his cause and “his willingness to die for that cause was an important ingredient in his attraction.”¹¹⁶

Before founding the Feda’iyan, Safavi is reported to have had some contact with Khomeini in 1943 and 1944, conveying to Khomeini the ideas of the Muslim Brotherhood, which he apparently became acquainted with during his brief stint in Iraq.¹¹⁷ I am skeptical that such contact occurred. More likely, this apocryphal connection between the two is part of the larger attempt to link Khomeini to Safavi’s revolutionary efforts in order to create the impression that Khomeini was more important and more revolutionary than he actually was in the pre-1962 period. These supposed early encounters with Khomeini are also considered important because Safavi would later be claimed by Khomeinism as part of its revolutionary genealogy, with the Feda’iyan re-imagined as the harbinger of later Islamic revolutionaries.¹¹⁸

Despite its similarities with the Egyptian Brotherhood, the Feda’iyan never gained the breadth or depth of support that the Brotherhood was able to command. Although the Egyptian Brotherhood engaged in violent acts and had a messianic center, this accounted for only a small percentage of its activities. Most of its members were engaged in religious education and social services. The Feda’iyan, on the other hand, lacked this philanthropic component and had little to offer the masses. Unlike the half a million members of the Egyptian Brotherhood in this period, there were less than a hundred

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 73.

¹¹⁷ Amir Taheri, *The Spirit of Allah: Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution* (Bethesda, Md.: Adler & Adler, 1986), pp. 98, 102.

¹¹⁸ As part of this questionable appropriation, the Islamic Republic has named a metro station and an expressway after Safavi.

committed members of the Feda'iyan, with those loosely affiliated amounting to less than thirty thousand.¹¹⁹ Despite its small active core, the Feda'iyan was able to exercise a massively disproportionate influence due to its large group of sympathizers, powerful patron (Ayatollah Kashani), and the fear it generated through dramatic, high-level assassinations.

The Feda'iyan-e Islam was xenophobic, isolationist, messianic, and puritanical. It desired not only the implementation of a harsh interpretation of Islamic law (including forced veiling and amputations for stealing) but also a strict purging of music, films, secular learning, Western clothing, tobacco, opium, and gambling.¹²⁰ It was especially critical of secular intellectuals, claiming in 1951 that “three-fourths of the educated class of Iranians is void of human character.” They also detested the coeducational system in which youth “give their passions full freedom.” Speaking against the clerical establishment, they claimed that “those who are wearing the clergy’s cloak but in reality are enemies of Islam should be unmasked and denounced.” Like Shirazi’s Brotherhood Party, they believed that the ignored Islamic provisions of the Constitution should be enforced, adding that “an administration should be established under the supervision of well-informed and honest clergymen.” They went far beyond Shirazi’s desire for the implementation of mainstream Islam, however, and instead imagined an Islamic utopia in which, for example, all cinemas would be banned or, if allowed, would be segregated and run only plays about Islamic history and morals, in order that the present “awful voices” of popular culture would be replaced with chanting from the Qur’an.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ NFAC (CIA), “Islam in Iran,” p. 73.

¹²⁰ Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, p. 259.

¹²¹ NFAC (CIA), “Islam in Iran,” p. 75.

Despite the Feda'iyān's abhorrence of Reza Shah, they nevertheless internalized his notions of utilizing public space and public dress for nationalist pedagogy. They internalized these lessons to the point that they saw it as natural to state, as the former shah did, that "public dress" is like the "national flag." They accepted Reza Shah's premise and methodology, differing only in that they thought that this imposed uniform should be Islamic and not involve "strange hats" or require citizens to "attach reins to their necks [ties]." ¹²²

Instead, Safavi believed that the nation should invent a new national dress that would conform to Islam and not ape foreign fashions. Of course, Safavi must have realized that non-Western, "Muslim" headwear already existed, in many forms, across many centuries. What he is instead suggesting here is not just a revival of the Islamic clothing from the period before Reza Shah, but the invention of a modern, homogenous Islamic dress that would serve as a unifying national "flag" for Iranian Shi'ism specifically. Earlier Islamic dress had been diverse in appearance and was seen by Safavi to be "foreign" (like Reza Shah's national dress), in that it reflected the influence of a variety of non-Iranian nations, including the Arabs, Afghans, or Turks. What Safavi wanted was to create a religio-national uniform for Iranian men that would serve the same unifying and patriotic function that the *chador* (an enveloping cloak that is largely limited to Iran) later served for religious Iranian women in the 1970s, i.e. a uniform of Shi'ite nationalism that unified, inspired, and homogenized the believers. ¹²³

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Many of the ideas of the Feda'iyān about the nationalization of Islamic dress eventually found their way into Khomeinism in diluted form (as did other elements of their positions on clothing, including the fetishization of the tie), since after the Feda'iyān was destroyed in 1955, its members were largely absorbed by other combatant Islamic organizations. See Chapter VIII.

Although the Feda'iyān's utopian landscapes are fascinating and under-explored, the organization is generally known for orchestrating a series of dramatic assassinations (and assassination attempts) between 1946 and 1955, and for inspiring later violence (such as the 1965 assassination of Prime Minister). The organization's first victim was Ahmad Kasravi, the aforementioned prominent secular intellectual. Kasravi was a powerful and eloquent critic of Shi'ism who raised the ire of the Iranian clergy of the 1940s in much the same way that Salman Rushdie rattled the ulama in the 1980s. Kasravi's views were generally considered anathema by conservative Shi'ites and the Feda'iyān was not alone in its opposition to his views. Khomeini also criticized Kasravi—anonously—in his first book, *Kashf al-Asrar* (Unveiling the Secrets), referring to him as *mahdur ad-damm* (i.e. indicating that his blood could be spilled with impunity). Amir Taheri takes this insult by Khomeini as a causative factor in the assassination of Kasravi and as a “virtual death sentence” on him.¹²⁴ This vastly overestimates the influence of Khomeini at this time and is part of the aforementioned tendency to retroactively insert a key role for Khomeini into earlier developments in order to maintain the Khomeinist myth that, although Khomeini did not actively oppose the Pahlavi regime until he was in sixties, he wanted to do so, but was restrained by Borujerdi, yet was still able to play a crucial role through his influence. In reality, Kasravi was detested by most conservative Iranians and was an easy target for both Safavi and Khomeini. He was a victim on whom the Feda'iyān could “cut its teeth” with a fair expectation that this act would be well-received in conservative circles.

Safavi attempted to kill Kasravi himself in April 1945. He failed, but gained a great deal of notoriety and support. The following March, Kasravi was assassinated by

¹²⁴ Taheri, *The Spirit of Allah*, p.101.

Hosein Emami, on Safavi's order. Although Kasravi was killed in his office, in the view of numerous witnesses, Safavi and Emami were cleared of the murder. This was achieved, in part, because none of the witnesses were willing to risk testifying against the Feda'iyān. More importantly, they were freed because the case was transformed from a simple criminal matter into a proxy war between secular reformers and the conservative establishment.

Kasravi's assassination led to the first significant secular-clerical standoff in the post-Reza Shah era. The assassin, Hosein Emami, was a *sayyed* (a descendant of the Prophet through the holy Imams) and this was used by conservatives in order to frame the prosecution of the murderers as the persecution of a descendant of the Imams for defending his religion against vile attacks.¹²⁵ The clerical establishment rallied behind Emami and implored the Shah to pardon him. The new Shah was forced to decide, in the midst of the Azerbaijan crisis,¹²⁶ if he wanted to take on the added burden of a fight with the clergy, in defense of a perceived enemy of religion, in order to kill a *sayyed*. There was little to be gained by this, and Emami was allowed to live. As a result, an aura of immunity emboldened the Feda'iyān, and a string of assassinations and assassination attempts occurred in the years that followed.

The Feda'iyān killed Abdolhossein Hazhir (the Minister of Court) in November 1949, while he was acting as the Shah's representative and was greeting the Moharram

¹²⁵ Ibid., pp.107-08.

¹²⁶ Allied forces occupied Iran in 1941, as discussed previously. They had agreed to leave Iran within six months of the end of hostilities, but the Soviet troops that had control of northern Iran refused to leave and continued to support regional separatist movements in the areas of Iran under their control. This led to a standoff between Stalin and the Iranian government, backed by the United States. This conflict (which ended with a Soviet withdrawal and the destruction of the separatist movements) is one of the most important early clashes in the Cold War. It prompted increased American interest in Iran because of the threat of Soviet expansion southward into the Middle East. See Louise Fawcett, *Iran and the Cold War: The Azerbaijan Crisis of 1946* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

processions converging on the Sepah Salar mosque in Tehran. He was standing with the Pakistani ambassador and several religious officials when Hossein Emami tapped him on his shoulder. When Hazhir turned, Emami shot him in the heart and then tried to shoot again, but the gun jammed. Not slowing down, Emami pounced on Hazhir and began to pummel his head with the butt of his gun until he was dragged off. Hazhir died of blood loss in the hospital before a blood transfusion could be performed.¹²⁷

Hazhir was an enemy of both the Fedai'yan and their patron, Ayatollah Kashani, for a number of reasons. One of these was that, as a result of political demonstrations against Hazhir a year and a half before, security forces supposedly fired into the protestors (led by a cleric holding a Qur'an), wounding over seventy. Hazhir was also (falsely) accused by the Fedai'yan of being a Baha'i, and this was publicized as the reason for his execution.¹²⁸

Hazhir's assassin had a reputation as a professional killer, having risen to infamy as one of Kasravi's assassins, along with his brother Mohammad Emami. This time, however, there was massive outrage in the press over the assassination, especially its brazen nature, in broad daylight, by a man who had already been given a free pass for a previous assassination. Emami was executed in secret, but the Fedai'yan hailed him as a hero. Leaflets were distributed across Tehran, which claimed that Hazhir "was sent to hell and [Emami] will go to heaven." They went on to claim that Emami was a martyr without fear, and that the only ones cowering were the "traitors" who ran the government. It was claimed that the Fedai'yan had thousands of members and that they were "nationalists" and would kill one "traitor" on their list for every hair that was hurt on

¹²⁷ USDS, *Iran, 1945-1949*, Reel 6: 700-03.

¹²⁸ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 75467, Tehran to FO, November 5, 7, and 11, 1949.

Emami's head. "Beware," they warned, "and fear God's anger and the bloodstained fingers of vengeance."¹²⁹

In March 1951, Prime Minister Razmara was assassinated by the Feda'iyān for his opposition to oil nationalization. Razmara was one of the most prominent opponents of oil nationalization and, as such, the Feda'iyān saw him as a traitor to the nation and a British stooge. After Khalil Tahmasebi killed Razmara with Safavi's approval, this set the stage for Mosaddeq to become Prime Minister shortly thereafter, with the assassination spun as a popular mandate for oil nationalization and a vote of no-confidence in those who opposed it. As with Kasravi's murder, the attempt to bring Razmara's assassin to justice became a proxy struggle, this time over the issue of oil nationalization.¹³⁰ Opposition to a pardon was staged as opposition to nationalization and a sign of Anglophilia.

As usual, the chief defender of the actions of the Feda'iyān was Ayatollah Kashani, an ambitious majles deputy who increased his own importance through strategic alliances with both Mosaddeq's National Front and Safavi's Feda'iyān. The Feda'iyān was never a part of the National Front, but were linked to Ayatollah Kashani and assisted the Front's efforts because of this alliance and because of a sincere hope that Mosaddeq would remove foreign influence and Islamicize Iran.

Although Tahmasebi was arrested, he was seen as a hero and the Feda'iyān expected that he would be promptly freed by Mosaddeq and Kashani out of gratitude and due to public pressure. Despite the debt that they owed the Feda'iyān, however, Mosaddeq and Kashani were unwilling to go along with many of their demands. Because

¹²⁹ USDS, *Iran, 1945-1949*, Reel 6: 700-03.

¹³⁰ Behdad, "Islamic Utopia," pp. 78-79.

of this, Safavi angrily denounced Kashani and Mosaddeq and threatened to kill them for their betrayal and for their failure to implement Islamic reform. As a result, Mosaddeq ordered Safavi's arrest on June 8, 1951, after which he "hid in the majles, where he remained until Safavi was arrested."¹³¹

With their leader imprisoned for many months, a group of frustrated Feda'iyān entered the jail where Safavi was held, said that they would not leave without him, and threatened that, if this did not occur, "our reaction will be so violent that it will surprise the whole world." They warned the new parliament that "the same force will be used and will plunge the 17th majles in blood" for "soon we shall assume power, and the country will be ruled by Moslems."¹³² The threats of disproportionate retribution were bluffs, but there was an assassination attempt on the Deputy Prime Minister (Hossein Fatemi), which was nearly successful. This led to further arrests and crackdowns, but majles deputies were nervous and feared for their lives. Many apparently believed the rumors that the Feda'iyān had assassins on the ready and could have anyone killed at any time. Out of fear, Razmara's killer was released on the pretense that he acted for the nationalist cause.

Safavi was also released from jail in February 1953. By this point, he had become so alienated from Mosaddeq that he supported the August 1953 coup that ousted him and returned the Shah to power.¹³³ In the years that followed, Safavi had the gratitude of Prime Minister Zahedi's administration because of his support for the coup. In the spring of 1955, however, the Shah betrayed the Islamic organizations and initiated a serious crackdown against them. As a result of this anti-clerical policy, the Feda'iyān

¹³¹ NFAC (CIA), "Islam in Iran," p. 74.

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ Choubine, *Dr. Muhammad Musaddiq and the Baha'is*, p. 71.

tried to kill Prime Minister Ala in November 1955. No longer enjoying the support of Kashani or the gratitude of the regime, the group was ruthlessly rooted out and Safavi was executed along with Tahmasebi and his chief lieutenants. They died “with victorious smiles on their faces,” seeing themselves as about to be rewarded for their services to Islam and to the Iranian nation.¹³⁴

Unlike the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood that inspired it, the Feda’iyan was a national movement. The Muslim Brotherhood’s manifesto was applicable to the entire Sunni world; although it grew via nationally organized chapters and became involved in national politics, its appeal was broader and its nature pan-Islamic. By contrast, the Feda’iyan was a resolutely Iranian construction, exclusivist, and not focused on Shi’ism in general, but specifically on Iranian Shi’ism. In its 1952 manifesto calling for the release of imprisoned members, the Feda’iyan refers to itself as “the Iranian Moslem Nation” and “We, the sons of Islam and Iran.” They refer to the imprisonment of their members as crimes against this authentic nation that constitutes Iran. Governmental leaders are placed in opposition to this imagined Islamic nation, and are described as “traitors” and an “apostate” and “heretic ruling class.”¹³⁵

Apostasy from the nation and apostasy from Shi’ism were conflated and reinterpreted in a novel way such that it could include even their former allies whose religious and national credentials were beyond question. The Feda’iyan’s extension of apostasy to co-religionists with objectionable political policies, and the belief that their murder was justified on these grounds, would find expression in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood a dozen years later, in the writings of Sayyid Qutb, whose influential 1964

¹³⁴ NFAC (CIA), “Islam in Iran,” p. 74.

¹³⁵ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 98719 / EP 1781 / 2, Feda’iyan proclamation, January 12, 1952.

work *Ma'alem fi al-Tariq (Milestones)* makes a similar argument in a Sunni context.¹³⁶

This opens up the intriguing possibility that, while the early Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt inspired Safavi, Safavi could have inspired the later Brotherhood, although an exploration of this possibility is beyond the scope of the present work.

Ironically, although the Feda'iyan attacked the Mosaddeq government as “traitors” opposed to the nation, the Feda'iyan itself later worked with the British against the sovereign Iranian government in the period leading up to the coup. In a top secret British Foreign Office memo from 1952, R. C. Zaehner muses on the advantages “of keeping the Feda'iyan as allies once they have wreaked their vengeance on the National Front.” In his view, their basic desire that Islamic Law “should be respected throughout the realm,” and corruption ended, were not sufficient reason to prevent them from continuing to be British allies after Mosaddeq fell. He defends their past “fanatical” behavior vis-à-vis Razmara and Hazhir (i.e. their murder) by highlighting that these victims “were regarded as representative of an alien European civilization” and were the leaders chosen by “a completely Westernized Court.” Zaehner notes that the group’s xenophobia is not uniform or inflexible as they were willingly working for the British through Sayyid Zia'eddin Tabataba'i,¹³⁷ despite their public statements that the British and the Americans were equally undesirable. He proposed a plan in which the Mosaddeq-era partnership with the Feda'iyan would continue until the National Front collapses, after which they would continue to be employed—indirectly through pro-British clerics—as a check on the Shah. Once they became somewhat pacified, he

¹³⁶ See Ahmad Moussalli, *Radical Islamic Fundamentalism: The Ideological and Political Discourse of Sayyid Qutb* (Beirut: American university of Beirut, 1992).

¹³⁷ Tabataba'i was a politician and newspaper publisher who had a reputation for being decidedly pro-British. He was Prime Minister briefly during the Reza Shah period.

considered them a possible political base for a political party led by reliable Anglophiles.¹³⁸

The Feda'iyān's switch from the patronage of Kashani to that of Tabataba'i was based on their assumption that he would "enforce the shari'at [Islamic law] as far as possible" and their belief that, unlike the pan-Islamic Kashani, with Tabataba'i "his mentality is purest Persian." Although Zaehner admits that Tabataba'i's "connection with us is in the widest open of open secrets," the Feda'iyān saw him as genuine in his religiosity, unlike Kashani, and although they knew he was pro-British, "of the three evils, they dislike us least."

Tabataba'i encouraged this attitude by persuading the Feda'iyān that in order to get rid of the greater threats—the Soviets and the Americans—the British were a useful ally. He pushed the position that the British have historically ruled indirectly and left their allies to their own religion while the Americans—"whose standards in sexual morality are, regrettably, lax"—are more decadent than the British. In addition to the implementation of Islamic Law, Tabataba'i promised the Feda'iyān that they would have British support for several other Islamic reform programs, such as rounding up all the prostitutes in Iran to be incarcerated in *maisons correctionnelles*, where they would undergo re-education in Islam. Such incentives, in Zaehner's view, provided "good grounds for hoping that once their task of liquidating traitors has been accomplished, they may be guided into more positively useful channels... [such as acting as] a useful check on any undue ambitions the Shah may still have."¹³⁹ Needless to say, this unlikely alliance seems to have collapsed in short order following the coup.

¹³⁸ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1540, Zaehner, "The Fida'iyān-i-Islam," March 1, 1952.

¹³⁹ Ibid.

Kashani

It is impossible to discuss the Feda'iyan-e Islam without discussing the important role played by its most important patron, Ayatollah Abo'l-Qasem Kashani (1882-1962), who was the most prominent "political mullah" of this period. Unlike Khomeini, who cultivated the perception that he did not have any political ambitions, Kashani was openly political, serving as a majles deputy and leading the nationalization movement with Mosaddeq before their partnership collapsed. He was the Speaker of the majles during both the oil nationalization and the 1953 coup.

Kashani was the black sheep of the clerical hierarchy. Among important ayatollahs, he was almost alone in his support for Mosaddeq, with the clerical hierarchy supporting the Shah. Kashani was also the only leading ayatollah who explicitly supported and patronized the terror campaign of the Feda'iyan-e Islam. Borujerdi and the clerical establishment detested him, doubted the sincerity of his belief in Islam, and saw an irreconcilable divide between Islam as they understood it and the pan-Islamic, Communist-sympathizing, and overtly political attitudes of Kashani. They blamed his time in Iraq for his aberrations and sought to juxtapose the sanctity of Borujerdi with Kashani's worldliness and shady connections. This hostility is explicitly conveyed in a 1952 polemical pamphlet that attacks Kashani and urges support for Borujerdi.

In this polemical piece, Kashani is denounced as a misleader and one who, in comparison to Borujerdi, is an idiot who "cannot even claim to compare himself with the theological students of Qum." In the First World War, he is said to have been a paid agent of both the Germans and the British, making a fortune only to waste it all on

prostitutes, supposedly spending the equivalent of 10,000 *rupees* on a Jewish girl in Basra. His actions were said to have literally shamed his father to death.

This is not his worst offense, however. He is said to have committed the cardinal sin of befriending his Baha'i doctor (Mohammad Fazel Burazjani) while in Baghdad. According to Borujerdi's supporters, this led to Kashani's acceptance of Baha'ism and to subsequent correspondence with Abdu'l-Baha (the leader of the Baha'i religion at the time), "in which he expressed faith in him." This most serious of crimes was said to have so inflamed the Shi'ites of Najaf that Kashani was expelled from that city for some time.¹⁴⁰

According to the pamphlet, Kashani then worked to install Reza Shah on the throne and was culpable in the murder of senior ulama, in exchange for which he received a salary of 1000 *tomans* a month, which he used to finance a habit of serial marriage every few days, to the point that a whole new class of prostitutes developed in Iraq known as "*zan aqa*" (wives of the gentleman, i.e. Kashani). Later, he supposedly again worked as a British agent, cashing in on his reputation as "their old and sincere agent."

By rejecting the Shah and joining with Mosaddeq to nationalize Iranian oil, Kashani was supposedly letting the country burn in the "flames of poverty" while using

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., FO 371 / 98719 / EP 1781 / 1, Embassy to FO, January 21, 1952. No dates are given for this supposed conversion, but the reference is, most likely, to Kashani's years in Najaf and Karbala shortly after the turn of the century. It should be pointed out that, despite the charges in this polemical piece, Kashani was actually fiercely opposed to the Baha'is. During the premiership of Mohammad Sa'ed, Kashani sought permission for an anti-Baha'i pogrom but was denied by the Prime Minister. Sa'ed got approval from the Shah to shoot Kashani or his supporters if they came within a block of the Baha'i sites that they planned to target. Sa'ed even had General Razmara set up the machine guns while he eagerly waited for Kashani to fall into the trap. Not being a fan of Kashani, Sa'ed grew upset when the ayatollah backed down, and even had men infiltrate and provoke Kashani in order to lure him into the trap, but Kashani was unwilling to act without state support (NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 20 / 03 / Box 7 / Folder 350, Memo of Conversation, June 16, 1955).

the people's money to pay for Cadillacs and gambling in addition to "alcoholic drinks, sodomy, and adultery." Readers are asked to look to Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi instead of Kashani and to ponder "whether a man who does not hold a theological diploma can falsely call himself an authorized *mojtahed* [cleric authorized to make independent religious decisions]," while at the same time "spending thousands of *tomans* of the Moslems' money on luxury."¹⁴¹

The accusations in the pamphlet are either egregious exaggerations or outright lies, but they reveal Borujerdi's camp's disgust with Kashani and their perception of him as a hedonistic apostate and a charlatan. Most interesting is their use of his life abroad to mark him as "foreign," and the utilization of the nebulous nature of this foreign period as a screen on which to project various crypto-loyalties, and on which to stage his various supposed crimes.

Clerical anger at Kashani was rooted, in part, in nervousness about his attempt to marshal, legitimize, and use terrorism to propel his own ambitions and silence critics. At one point, for example, the headquarters of the *Ettela'at* newspaper, was surrounded by hundreds of demonstrators after it published an article critical of the upswing in Shi'ite fanaticism. The crowd threatened to attack the publisher (Massoudi) and held him personally accountable for denigrating the Islamic movement associated with Kashani. Another journalist, from the AP, was also threatened for releasing reports that were critical of Kashani's pro-Nazi past. Those, like Tabataba'i, who had earlier sought to pander to disaffected young men by giving a platform to people like Kashani in his paper, *Keshvar*, grew nervous and sought to distance himself from Kashani.¹⁴²

¹⁴¹ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 98719 / EP 1781 / 1, Embassy to FO, January 21, 1952.

¹⁴² USDS, *Iran, 1945-1949*, Reel 7: 342.

Despite the increasingly violent and unwieldy nature of this revival-turned-“movement,” Kashani embraced it and became the patron that the movement needed, a role no other senior cleric was willing to assume. By 1948, Kashani was generally accepted as the “leader” of the “present religious movement.” A leader that London informed Washington was a “real demagogue” who “was known for his use of the Palestine situation as a powerful rallying point.” He led protests against Israel’s existence, as well as protests against both the United States and the Soviets, for recognizing its existence.¹⁴³

In many ways, Kashani largely echoed the pan-Islamism of Asadabadi (also known as “Sayyid Jamal-al-Din al-Afghani,” 1838-1897). Asadabadi claimed that Muslim in-fighting was the reason why the West was dominant and he urged Muslims in the Middle East to unite to defend themselves against colonialism and to prevent the Middle East suffering the same fate as India.¹⁴⁴ Kashani modernized this argument by replacing the Indian example with Palestine and by claiming that God had only allowed Israel to be created in order to catalyze the reunification of the Muslim community, since Muslims need “greater unity in order to defeat our enemy, maintain our independence and drive out the foreigners from our home.” “The souls of your fathers,” he claims, “...look upon you with hate and anger when they see 400 million of their children obey the foreigners.”¹⁴⁵

It is clear from his ongoing references to Islam as a whole, the entire Muslim *ummah* (community), Palestine, and the colonization and division of the Arab world, that

¹⁴³ Ibid., 341.

¹⁴⁴ For Asadabadi, see: Nikki Keddie, *An Islamic Response to Imperialism: Political and Religious Writings of Sayyid Jamal al-Din "al-Afghani"* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968).

¹⁴⁵ *Kayhan*, 4 Shahrivar 1330 [August 27, 1951]. Quoted in USDS, *Iran, 1950-1954*, Reel 40: 955.

Kashani is more of an anti-imperialist and pan-Islamist than he is an Iranian nationalist. Like Asadabadi's involvement in the Tobacco Protest in Iran, Kashani's involvement in oil nationalization is a local application of a much larger trans-national agenda. This attitude is in sharp contrast to the aforementioned Iran-centric unification mission of Ayatollah Shirazi and his Brotherhood Party, or the Feda'iyān's battle to establish a specifically Iranian Islamic utopia.

Contemporary American assessments of Kashani mistakenly saw his project as a "reaffirmation of Shiism as an Iranian nationalist force."¹⁴⁶ This misreading came from Kashani's utilitarian appropriation of some of the rhetoric of nationalism and from his pandering to nationalist groups such as the Feda'iyān-e Islam. Kashani's superficial use of nationalist language can be seen in his discussion of a "national" Muslim army. In 1952, Kashani informed the Americans that the army of the state should be replaced by a new, million-man "national" army of Muslims in Iran, which he would train and lead. He recalled the past glories of "his" proto-army, the Feda'iyān-e Islam, and looked ahead to the future exploits of his Muslim "national" army, claiming: "We sent Razmara to hell and we shall also send Naguib [Egypt's secular leader] to hell." He further warned: "I am not an ordinary person. I am leader of Moslem world and Moslem world will soon be force to be reckoned with."¹⁴⁷ His transnational ambitions are clear, with Iran treated as the first step of a larger pan-Islamic agenda, including the removal of secular Arab leaders and the unification of the wider Islamic world under his leadership. He refers to himself most often not as an Iranian leader, or a Shi'ite leader, but as a leader of the Muslim world. As such, one of his main obsessions, during the height of the oil crisis,

¹⁴⁶ NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 19 / 04 / Box 24 / Folder 050, February 21, 1952.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 19 / 04 / Box 25 / Folder 123, Ambassador Henderson File, November 11, 1952.

was his ongoing struggle to organize an international Islamic conference in Iran, which would serve as his debut as a leader of the international Muslim community.¹⁴⁸

Kashani's expedient use of the language of nationalism, despite his essentially pan-Islamic agenda, provided a model for Khomeini in the 1960s, when he began a similar patronage of former Feda'is, despite his largely pan-Islamic worldview.¹⁴⁹

Creating an "Islamic Sphere"

The new Islamic organizations interacted with each other and with existing Islamic institutions to engage in what Tavakoli-Targhi describes as an attempt to create an "Islamic public sphere."¹⁵⁰ This effort involved safeguarding and promoting Islam in Iran and actively challenging and opposing all forms of "irreligion," especially Communism and Baha'ism. Much of this activism was limited to the rhetorical realm, not only through sermons but, more importantly, through the explosion of Islamic publications which occurred in this period.

Notable publications included *A'in-e Islam* (the Religion of Islam), *Parcham-e Islam* (the Banner of Islam), *Donya-ye Islam* (the Islamic World), *Neda-ye Haqq* (the Call of Truth), and *Nur-e Danesh* (the Light of Knowledge). Most publications were linked to particular associations, but there were significant levels of inter-textuality, as ideas and incidents that were brought up in one journal would be refined, expanded, and standardized in other publications, such that an anecdotal report in one letter could be picked up, generalized, and, over a period of time, reified as fact. It was through the testing ground of these publications that the arguments for the nature, rights, and goals of

¹⁴⁸ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 98719; USDS, *Iran, 1950-1954*, Reel 44: 159.

¹⁴⁹ See Chapter VIII.

¹⁵⁰ Tavakoli-Targhi, "Anti-Baha'ism and Islamism in Iran," pp. 200-201.

the “Muslim nation” were initially worked out. Although this virtual Islamic sphere was important, it should be noted that it was limited in scope and influence, with even one of the most influential publications, *Parcham-e Islam*, almost having to close down due to poor sales.¹⁵¹

According to Rasul Jafarian, from the time of Shahrivar 1320 (Reza Shah’s departure) onwards, the Islamic forces (*niruha*) were united in the arena (*ma’rakeh*) of battle (*mobarezeh*) against the infiltration and influence (*nofuz*) of the Baha’i minority. This common enemy provided the Islamic organizations, and their publications, “one of the key elements in their strengthening and consolidation.”¹⁵² Moreover, it played a key role in refining and developing the rhetoric of Shi’ite activism, as it evolved in the Islamic press.

Jafarian’s exploration of this literary development, catalyzed by anti-Baha’ism, begins with a series of complaints against the Baha’is in the conservative *A’in-e Islam* magazine, starting in 1944. This publication provided a national forum for the expression of local anger at the state of affairs vis-à-vis the Baha’i issue. Complaints were published from such diverse locations as Zahedan, Qom, Sanandaj and Jahrom, expressing anger that the Baha’is in their locality were increasing their “self-serving propaganda,” had taken over important governmental posts, were insulting Islam, and were causing “anxiety” among the residents. As a result, it was demanded that action be taken from the center for the “eradication of the corrupt elements.”¹⁵³

Since these appeals were rhetorically addressed to the central government, the Baha’i threat came to be framed as a danger to the state. Baha’is increasingly came to be

¹⁵¹ Ibid., pp. 210-11.

¹⁵² Jafarian, *Jaryanha va Sazmanha*, pp. 162, 167.

¹⁵³ *A’in-e Islam*, 1:11, p. 3; 1:13, pp. 5-7; 2:23, p. 10; and 3:26, p. 11.

cast not as a religious heresy but as a threat to national security. In this emerging, self-referential and self-reaffirming rhetoric, it is the sedition (*toghyan*) of the Baha'is that is given as the reason for the hatred (*boghz*) that people feel for them. This “danger” to the state was said to be the cause of panic (*haras*), since these supposedly insurgent elements had infiltrated the government and had gained close access to the Court.¹⁵⁴ To support these accusations, complaints often included lists of Baha'is holding high office. These individuals were said to have taken advantage of their status to further propagate their cause at the expense of the general population.

This “infiltration” was presented as a cancer that was impossible to ignore and which the general citizenry had no choice but to try to remove themselves, in self-defense, because of the failures of government to protect them from this threat. Although Baha'is did not engage in demonstrations or riots, they were held responsible for the political demonstrations and violence that occurred in opposition to them, which was blamed on their supposed intrigues and “incitement” (*fitnah angizi*).¹⁵⁵

The Feda'iyān-e Islam's *Parcham-e Islam* announced its intention to join the anti-Baha'i fray (*mobarezeh*) in its Mehr 1326 [1947] issue, claiming that their intervention on this issue was in part due to the Baha'is' wickedness, in contradiction of civility and the laws of the state.¹⁵⁶ Baha'is were accused of striking out against (*zarb*) and cursing Muslims, but this was framed not as a religious dispute, but as dissension to disrupt national unity, which was done at the behest of foreign powers. The fact that an earlier Baha'i leader (Abdu'l-Baha) had been knighted (for humanitarian efforts during the First

¹⁵⁴ Jafarian, *Jaryanha va Sazmanha*, pp. 162-63.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 164.

¹⁵⁶ *Parcham-e Islam*, Mehr 1326 [September/October, 1947].

World War) was advanced as evidence of this supposed foreign ownership of the religion.¹⁵⁷

In a February 1948 open letter in *Parcham-e Islam*, the Jami'at-e Mazhab-e Ja'fari warns of the infiltration of the Baha'is into the centers of power and calls for action to end this state of affairs. The letter claims that the infiltration of the Baha'is has been occurring little by little and that it had reached the point where Baha'is hold important positions in every ministry and governmental office. To guard the nation from this danger, the Shah is called upon to dismiss Baha'i employees. Despite the accusation that the Baha'is permeate the regime, the regime itself is not directly targeted or implicated at this point, as it would be in similar anti-Baha'i critiques in the 1960s. The use of "infiltration" suggests that this situation occurred without the regime's active consent, and the letter is explicitly royalist, praising the Shah as "sacred and blessed."¹⁵⁸

In 1949, *Donya-ye Islam* published an anonymous reply to the open letter above. This appeal was addressed to the majles and urged them to protect "order and security" by opposing the "treacherous plots" of the Baha'is. If this is not done, "the day will come when the Muslim nation of Iran will settle its accounts with the enemies of Islam and you will be punished mercilessly." Moving from the majles to the clerics, the appeal urges systematic action.

It is imperative to develop a system for propagation that is based on the exalted principles of religion, a system that will deepen the faith of the people... This system will awaken the people one by one, until such time as every Muslim is capable, by producing strong rational proofs and showing the power of Islam, to deliver a fierce blow to the mouth of those who oppose Islam.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., Bahman 1326 [January/February, 1948].

¹⁵⁸ Tavakoli-Targhi, "Anti-Baha'ism and Islamism in Iran," p. 209.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

Interestingly, this appeal is framed in terms of the protective duties of the majles and the self-defense of the people. The clergy are largely pushed to the side, at least rhetorically, and cast simply as those whose job it was to animate the people. It is the people themselves, the citizenry, who are the chief actors of the drama, who only need to be “awakened” to their Muslim-ness before arising to serve through individual and collective action against their common enemy. The majles is framed as the servant of the citizenry, but here this unmarked category is a reference not to Iranians as a whole, but to the aforementioned “Muslim nation,” which was considered to be the true Iran.

In this discourse of admonition, Baha’is are denounced as “those who have deviated” (*monharefan*), and as a political group that is *zaleh*¹⁶⁰ (misled, misleading, lost, astray), *gomrah* (misled, astray, lost, wandering, deceived, deluded, seduced, perverted), *gomrah konandeh* (seductive, sinister, delusory) or *mozel* (which also means misleading, leading astray, or seductive).¹⁶¹ An interesting aspect of these pejoratives is that they all imply that the Baha’is are lost, or will cause others to become lost and seduced away from the fold. This involves the idea that the Baha’i “other” is akin to a prodigal son, or a lost sheep, wrongfully separated from the Islamic flock. This idea is also seen in the language used to refer to Baha’is who leave their religion to convert to Islam. This act is

¹⁶⁰ The “misguided and misguiding” label actually pre-dates the Baha’i religion and was used in anti-Babi polemic (Tavakoli-Targhi, “Anti-Baha’ism,” p. 203). In the Qajar and early Pahlavi period, it was used to imply that Babis (and Baha’is after them) were misled about Islamic matters and were leading others into heresy and apostasy. This earlier opposition to the Babis and the Baha’is was part of a much-longer history of (Usuli) clerical opposition to *batani* (esoteric) movements, in which these groups were staged as the Other. This can be seen with the Hurufis, Nuqtavis, Sufis, Shaykhis, and others (see, for example, the early sections of Denis MacEoin’s dissertation—included in *The Messiah of Shiraz*—and Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs and Messiahs*). What is different in the later Baha’i case, however, is that it occurred in the context of nationalization. In the post-1941 polemic, the charges against the Other shift, from misguided Muslims to misguided Iranians. The primary charge is no longer leading the Muslim community into heresy, but leading the Iranian nation into colonialism.

¹⁶¹ See, for example: *Parcham-e Islam*, Esfand 1328 [February/March, 1950]; Jafarian, *Jaryanha va Sazmanha*, pp. 164, 167; and *Kayhan*, 26 Ordibehesht 1334 [May 17, 1955].

described as a “returning” (*bar gashtan*) to Islam.¹⁶² As with the Hindu nationalist assumption of a primordial Hindu identity that certain groups have lost but can reclaim, the anti-Baha’i rhetoric likewise involves the assumption that Baha’is are “lost” Muslim-Iranians who can be reclaimed.¹⁶³

Conclusion

The Islamic associations of the 1940s spoke of an Islamic future in grandiose, utopian vagaries. They glorified an “Islamic Iran,” but this nebulous panacea was amorphous, defined largely in terms of what it was not. While the Left had concrete slogans of “bread and work,” the Islamic associations and the ulama focused on what was wrong with Iran—corruption, poverty, lost glory, and humiliation at the hands of foreigners—and promised that Islam offered an end to this state of affairs and a better future, although little details were provided.

The deficiencies of the clerical discourse on “Islamic Iran” were implicitly acknowledged by its pairing, almost from the beginning, with anti-Baha’i and anti-Tudeh fear-mongering. The use of the Left as a countersubject to Islam declined later, as Tudeh was crushed in the 1950s and as intellectuals and combatants from the Right and the Left found common cause in the anti-regime struggle.¹⁶⁴ The use of Baha’ism as the inverse of Islam, however, became hegemonic (as will be demonstrated in subsequent chapters).

¹⁶² For examples of these usages, see: Jafarian, *Jaryanha va Sazmanha*, pp. 164, 166; and Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat*, p. 208 n1.

¹⁶³ This belief in religio-patriotic rehabilitation eventually formed the fundamental premise behind the work of the Hojjatiyeh Association, which became the umbrella organization through which most anti-Baha’i action was taken after 1955. See Chapter VIII.

¹⁶⁴ For the complicated relationship between Islam and the Left in the decades before the 1979 Revolution, see the previously mentioned works of Ervand Abrahamian (*Iran between Two Revolutions, Khomeinism, and Radical Islam*) as well as Maziar Behrooz’s *Rebels with a Cause: The Failure of the Left in Iran* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 1999) and Ali Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian: a Political Biography of Ali Shariati* (London: IB Tauris, 2000).

Jafarian points out that, out of the two threats to Islam, it was only in reaction to Baha'ism that believers "have a sensitivity (*hesasiyat dashtan*) that is singular and unique (*tanha va tanha*)."¹⁶⁵ The following chapter shows how the discourse of anti-Baha'ism acted as the counter-melody to the nationalization of Iranian Islam.

¹⁶⁵ Jafarian, *Jaryanha va Sazmanha*, p. 368.

CHAPTER III

“Islam is in Danger”: Anti-Baha’ism and the Nationalization of Shi’ism, 1946-1954

Introduction

As discussed in the previous chapter, Ayatollah Shirazi called for a united Islamic front in order to achieve what no individual or group could hope to accomplish alone. By the late 1940s and early 1950s, however, Islamic groups were divided over the priorities and specifics of Islamicization, and were equally disunified when it came to the political issues of the day (such as oil nationalization). They were only able to maintain the united front envisioned by Shirazi when it came to the Baha’is, who were cast as the internal Other against which the emerging Islamic national self could be defined.

The struggle against the Baha’is, which had been developing in the discourse of the Islamic organizations, crossed into the mainstream and began to become an issue of truly national concern when it was taken up by Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi, who used the issue as a populist rallying point with which to positively frame the Islamic movement as a struggle between the honest, patriotic values of “the people” and the cosmopolitan, unpatriotic, and cliquish values of the elites (the Baha’is). This populist opposition to Baha’ism was later turned against the regime itself, after Baha’ism and Pahlavism were conflated following the events of the late 1950s, discussed in later chapters.

Before pursuing my discussion of anti-Baha'ism in the late 1940s and early 1950s, I discuss the larger process of nationalizing religion that occurred in Iran in this period. I do so by looking at the pressure applied to the recognized religious minorities to restrict their leadership to Iranians and to demonstrate patriotic loyalty in other ways.¹

Demonstrating loyalty: the official minorities and the nationalization of religion

In the aftermath of Iran's wartime occupation, there was a predictable upswing in xenophobia and its concomitant, nativism. From the late 1940s until the 1953 coup, Iranian politics was dominated by these two forces. Oil nationalization is the most famous example of the popular demand that Iran regain control of its own resources and that foreign influence must be limited or removed, but nationalization was extended to other areas as well, including the religious sphere. This demand for religious nativism can be seen in the reining in of prominent foreign missionaries, the prohibition of foreign churches having services in Persian, and new laws that prohibited all non-Muslim religions in Iran from having foreign leaders or allowing foreigners to preach to their members. The 1949 edict that contained many of these new restrictions also banned

¹ For non-Muslim minorities in Iran, see Eliz Sanasarian, *Religious Minorities in Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and A. William Samii, "The Nation and Its Minorities: Ethnicity, Unity, and State Policy in Iran," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 20:1-2 (2000): pp. 128-137. For the Jewish community in Iran, see Habib Levy, *Comprehensive History of the Jews of Iran: The Outset of the Diaspora*, ed. Hooshang Ebrami, trans. George Maschk (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 1999); David Yeroushalmi, *The Jews of Iran in the Nineteenth Century* (Leiden: Brill, 2009); Daniel Tsadik, *Between Foreigners and Shi'is: Nineteenth-Century Iran and its Jewish Minority* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007); Hilda Nissimi, *The Crypto-Jewish Mashhadis: The Shaping of Religious and Communal Identity in Their Journey from Iran to New York* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2007); and Amnon Netzer, "Persian Jewry and Literature: A Sociological View," in *Sephardi and Middle Eastern Jewries: History and Culture in the Modern Era*, ed. Harvey E. Goldberg (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), pp. 240-255. For Christianity in Iran, see Richard Schwartz, "The Structure of Christian-Muslim Relations in Contemporary Iran" (PhD dissertation, Washington University, 1973); and Cosroe Chaqueri, ed., *Armenians of Iran: The Paradoxical Role of a Minority in a Dominant Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1998).

foreign religious officials from coming to Iran to “inspect” their Iranian branches, and forbid foreign, non-Muslim religions from becoming involved in Iranian politics.²

This law was, ostensibly, aimed at the Armenians and meant to forestall the Soviets choosing one of their own to replace the recently-deceased Armenian archbishop in Tabriz, but it was also used—albeit inconsistently—against religious minorities in general.³ As part of this push for nationalizing the minorities and their institutions, the mixed-heritage (Anglo-Armenian) Aidin sisters were blocked from continuing their duties as headmistresses at Christian schools. They were replaced by “local” women.⁴ At minority schools that previously employed Iranians as well as foreigners, only one foreign teacher was allowed to stay under the new provisions. The Shah’s intimate friend, Ernest Perron, himself a Catholic, fought Mosaddeq over this issue until he was able to delay further plans to restrict foreign leadership of Iran’s religious minorities.⁵

The provisions continued to be enforced haphazardly, however, and were supported by additional legislation, such as the February 25, 1952 order against non-Iranians proselytizing within Iran. As a result of these new restrictions, some long-established expatriates in Iran, like Clement Heydenburk, were targeted. Heydenburk ran a Presbyterian orphanage in Kermanshah and had been conducting regular services for over a dozen years. In 1954, however, local enemies used the anti-proselytization laws to compel the authorities to block his activities. As a result, he was told that he was breaking the law by conducting religious services for his congregation, since he was not Iranian. He protested that if he could not teach anyone the Gospel at his orphanage then

² USDS, *Iran, 1945-1949*, Reel 7: 350; USDS, *Iran, 1950-1954*, Reel 40: 941, 947-952; NACPM, RG 84 350 / 61 / 19 / 04 / Box 25, letter dated March 18, 1951.

³ USDS, *Iran, 1945-1949*, Reel 7: 352.

⁴ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 98720, Tehran to FO, January 28, 1952.

⁵ *Ibid.*, FO 371 / 98720 / EP 1782 / 7, Tehran to FO, May 3, 1952.

his home church would likely withdraw funding for it. In reply, he was told that the government had no choice but to enforce the existing regulations.⁶

In terms of the Jewish minority, despite anger at the fate of the Palestinians following the creation of Israel, and the widespread presence of anti-Semitism, Jews in Iran were—for the most part—treated better and were more socially integrated than the Jews in the Arab world during this period. Iranian Kurdistan⁷ provided a notable exception, when looting and assaults forced four thousand Jews to flee and led many to seek the comparative safety of Israel.⁸ This was not representative of Iran as a whole.

Even though Iran's Jewish population dwarfed that of Iraq, almost all of those leaving Iran for Israel were Iraqi refugees and, among the small fraction of Iranian Jews attempting to go to Israel, most were from Iranian Kurdistan. Among the small number of Iranian Jewish emigrants from other areas, most were described as “voluntary refugees” who left to break the cycle of poverty. For these reasons, the Jewish refugee issue was treated as an “Arab issue” and neither the Iranian government nor the small percentage of affluent Jews in Iran took an active interest in the fate of the refugees, despite the fact that at one point nearly a thousand people were cramped into one small synagogue without adequate resources, while hundreds more slept in the nearby Jewish cemetery (without any sanitary facilities), or on the street.⁹

⁶ USDS, *Iran, 1950-1954*, Reel 41: 47-49.

⁷ Most Kurds in the Middle East live in a loosely-defined area known as Kurdistan, which includes parts of Iran, Iraq, Syria, and Turkey. Kurds have their own language and culture and some Kurdish nationalists hope to establish independent Kurdish rule in all or parts of Kurdistan. In Iran, 7% of the population is Kurdish, and Kurdish-majority areas lie, for the most part, along parts of the borders with Iraq and Turkey. For a useful survey of Kurdish history, see David McDowall, *A Modern History of the Kurds* (London: IB Taurus, 2004). Also see Abbas Vali, *Kurds and the State in Iran: The Making of Kurdish Identity* (London: IB Taurus, forthcoming).

⁸ Tensions over Jewish refugees were heightened in Iranian Kurdistan for a variety of reasons (including a famine and subsequent crop failure that further aggravated the strain of having more than ten thousand Jewish refugees entering Iran through Kurdish areas).

⁹ USDS, *Iran, 1950-1954*, Reel 40: 882-891.

When foreign Jewish aid workers working in Iran raised the possibility of a pogrom against Iranian Jews, they were pooh-poohed as naïve by the Iranian Jewish community. Only a few years later, however, the Israeli *Jewish Morning Journal* ran the following headline on March 24, 1952: “Jews in Iran in a panic because of threat of pogrom.” This threat, which was taken very seriously by Iranian Jews, came at the height of the crisis over oil nationalization. Due to the dire economic problems faced by the government as a result of the blockade of Iranian oil following its nationalization, the Mosaddeq administration requested a loan of fifteen million *rials* from the Jewish community. Although the community had some very affluent members, such a large sum was impossible to obtain quickly in the midst of an economic crisis. Jewish leaders pleaded with Mosaddeq, but he said that the money was needed. To force the issue, Mosaddeq’s then political ally, Ayatollah Kashani, “who is known as the Iranian Hitler,” met with Jewish leaders (apparently without Mosaddeq’s knowledge) and told them that if he was not paid, “the results will be unpleasant.” He warned that if there was non-compliance, “every Jew in Iran would pay with his blood ‘for his opposition to the national Iranian government.’” In spite of great efforts, the full amount could not be obtained since, despite stereotypes of affluence and influence, most of the primarily rural Jewish community had “plod rod” to contribute. Children were reportedly forced to take to the streets to beg in an attempt to meet the requested amount.¹⁰ Ten million *rials* were eventually paid.¹¹

The perception of Jewish affluence led to the mistaken idea that this group had money to spare that could be used to aid the nation at a time of profound crisis, with

¹⁰ NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 19 / 04/ Box 42 / Folder 570.1 – General, concerning the Jewish situation in Iran, January 23, 1952; USDS, *Iran, 1950-1954*, Reel 40: 905.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, “Preoccupation of Jews with present situation in Iran,” January 23, 1952.

failure to contribute taken as an anti-patriotic stance. In the earlier refugee crisis involving Iraqi Jews, Iranian Jews had been aloof, believing themselves safe and integrated into the Iranian nation. With the increased emphasis on nativism as the oil crisis escalated, Iranian Jews were called upon to prove their Iranian identity and loyalty by contributing to the nationalist cause. They were treated as second-class citizens, and were the victims of anti-Semitic assumptions and threats, but they were, behind all of this, at least considered to be Iranian and to have a role in the national struggle. The Baha'is had no such place. They were treated as irreconcilable, irredeemably "foreign" elements, who were cast as a fifth column within Iran.

Anti-Baha'ism, 1941-1954

Abbas Amanat and Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi have identified a shift in anti-Baha'ism in the 1940s, as accusations of treason and anti-patriotism (i.e. national apostasy) replaced charges of religious apostasy.¹² Unlike these two assessments, most discussions of Baha'i persecutions are not as distinguishing about the significance of changing anti-Baha'i sentiment over time, instead grouping the Babi and Baha'i religions together and discussing a "century and a half" of mostly continuous persecution, from the beginning of the Babi movement in 1844 until the present, even though the Baha'i Faith itself did not

¹² I have consciously avoided getting drawn into an analysis of the heretical arguments of the earlier period because this explanation for anti-Baha'ism has been excessively foregrounded and mistakenly applied to the post-1941 period. This is not dissimilar to the problematic conflation of traditional anti-Semitism with its national incarnation in the Middle East following the creation of Israel. I am limiting my discussion of earlier religious objections since my main aim is to situate the anti-Baha'ism that culminated in the 1955 pogrom in terms of the larger threads of Iranian history without getting drawn into theology, martyrology, apologetics, or the exotic and complex history of the Babis and Baha'is, which has tended to contribute to the ghettoization of Baha'i history and its (partially self-imposed) segregation from mainstream Iranian history. As a corrective move, I am attempting to discuss Baha'i history not in terms of Shi'ite eschatology and heresiology, but rather as a component of the history of the *ulama*, the Pahlavi regime, and American foreign policy.

even exist until the 1860s.¹³ The most recent example of this ahistorical approach is last year's *160 Sal Mobarezeh ba A'in-e Baha'i (160 Years of Combating the Baha'i Faith)*.¹⁴

Taking a more sophisticated view, Amanat points out that whereas Baha'is were attacked as heretics in the Qajar and early Pahlavi periods, from the 1940s onwards anti-Baha'ism underwent a profound transformation, moving away from the realm of 'heresy' into allegations of corruption, espionage, and conspiracy. As anti-Baha'ism shifted to an attack on corruption and unpatriotic collaboration with foreign powers, it was taken up by intellectuals and secular Iranians who had little interest in earlier accusations of heresy. This new phase of anti-Baha'ism was, in many ways, a rallying cry based on the reaffirmation of Shi'ism as the inverse of Baha'ism. As Amanat puts it, anti-Baha'ism was "transformed into an act of reaffirming a threatened and confused Shi'i 'self' at a time when social dislocation, acculturation, and political oppression under the shah left little else for the Shi'i majority to rally behind."¹⁵ Tavakoli-Targhi likewise claims that the Baha'i Faith was opposed as a heresy from its inception until the 1940s, but that in this decade it came to be opposed primarily in terms of its supposed foreignness, despite being a "genuinely Iranian religion."¹⁶

Tavakoli-Targhi contends that this marking of the Baha'is as "foreign" is based on a "purposeful forgetfulness" of the Iranian and Shi'ite origins of the religion. He links

¹³ For a problematization of the conflation of Babi and Baha'i history, see MacEoin, "From Babism to Baha'ism."

¹⁴ Fereyduun Vahman, *160 Sal Mobarezeh ba A'in-e Baha'i* (Darmstadt, Germany: Asr-e Jadid, 2010). Despite my objection to its title, this book is a useful resource. For additional details on the persecution of Baha'is in different periods, see: Mottahedeh, *Representing the Unrepresentable*; Amanat, "The Historical Roots of the Persecution of Babis and Baha'is in Iran;" Chehabi, "Anatomy of Prejudice: Reflections on Secular anti-Baha'ism in Iran;" Tavakoli-Targhi, "Anti-Baha'ism and Islamism in Iran;" Reza Afshari, "The Discourse and Practice of Human Rights Violations of Iranian Baha'is in the Islamic Republic of Iran" in Seena Fazel and Dominic Brookshaw ed., *The Baha'is of Iran: Socio-historical studies* (New York: Routledge, 2008); and Cole, "The Baha'i Minority and Nationalism in Contemporary Iran."

¹⁵ Amanat, "The Historical Roots," pp. 171-72.

¹⁶ Tavakoli-Targhi, "Anti-Baha'ism and Islamism in Iran," p. 202.

this shift in anti-Baha'ism to a more general turn to xenophobia and nativism in the post-War period, which sought to explain Iran's failures by appealing to an external cause and promoting nativism as a panacea. As part of this larger phenomenon, the Islamic organizations of the period promoted a nationalized form of Shi'ism as the answer to all of Iran's problems, and the Islamicization of the public sphere as the first step in this soteriological project. A key element of this sanctification of the public sphere involved the removal of its previous openness to non-conformist thought and belief.¹⁷

The "othering" of the Baha'is was intimately connected to this intellectual construction of Iran as a "Muslim nation." The two ideas were so linked that an inverse relationship was perceived between the two sides of the binary, such that it was firmly believed that the infrastructure of Baha'ism had to first be torn down in order for an Islamic nation to be established in its place. This need by the clergy and Islamic organizations to define themselves negatively, as the inverse of Baha'ism, and to delay expectations of an Islamic utopia by shunting this possibility into a post-Baha'i future, was symptomatic of a lack of ideological confidence.

According to Sanasarian, one powerful motivator driving anti-Baha'i action has been the aggressor's need for "self-justification," their need to justify and explain their own failings and unacceptable situation by looking for a scapegoat.¹⁸ Baha'is were chosen to fulfill this function for a number of reasons. One was that, unlike other religious minorities who were traditionally easily identifiable and segregated in various ways, Baha'is were found in all locations and were indistinguishable from the wider

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 200-01.

¹⁸ Sanasarian, "The Comparative Dimension," p. 160.

population in terms of language, dress, neighborhood, names, or ethnicity.¹⁹ As such, they could be framed as “the enemy within,” since they were indistinguishable, at the surface level, from those around them, yet they maintained a separate, private religious affiliation.²⁰

Sanasarian also suggests that the verbal abuse involved in anti-Baha’ism should be seen in light of Brennan’s observation that “Behind almost every escalation of linguistic derision is some kind of ideology: that is a philosophy, a social theory, a set of interrelated ideas, concepts, beliefs, and values that generate and sustain the dissemination of dehumanizing terminology.”²¹ If we accept Brennan’s theory that escalations in minority persecution are symptomatic of ideological developments, we can link the anti-Baha’ism of the post-1941 period to deeper ideological changes among the clergy and Islamic associations involved in the anti-Baha’i struggle. Whereas earlier persecutions were perhaps symptomatic of class struggles, the post-1941 persecution was also symptomatic of the early stages of Shi’ite nationalism. That is to say, it was related to the imagining of the “limits” of the nation.

In order for religious nationalism to find traction, it (ironically) must frame the “religious” issue in such a way that the movement can be supported by even secular individuals, as occurred with Islam in Pakistan, Judaism in Israel, and Islam in Iran’s 1979 Revolution. Such framings often involve the use of scare tactics involving a dangerous Other. Acceptance of the polemic about the dangers of the Other is a gateway to the acceptance of the other side of the binary, the belief that religion provides the best

¹⁹ This is generally true, but there are some ways in which a stranger could be recognized as a Baha’i. Many prominent Baha’i families, for example, took their last name from the terms that Baha’u’llah or Abdu’l-Baha used in tablets addressed to their ancestors. Many Baha’is also wear rings or necklaces featuring a distinct and recognizable Baha’i symbol (the Baha’i “ringstone symbol”).

²⁰ Sanasarian, “The Comparative Dimension,” p. 163.

²¹ William Brennan, *Dehumanizing the Vulnerable* (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1995), pp. 11-12.

way to achieve national unity to face this threat. If, shortly before Indian independence, for example, a secular Muslim could be convinced that he would be mistreated under a Hindu majority, this belief also involved the implicit acceptance of the argument's complement, that he would be better treated in a Muslim state. In this scenario, Pakistan is not appealing based on religious sentiment but is instead sold, to religious as well as secular Muslims, as a defensive move against a dangerous Other. Israel is, likewise, a nationalization of religious identity as a defense against a threatening Other, which is a premise that has been appealing to secular as well as religious Jews.

A similar argument was being made in the post 1941 anti-Baha'i discourse. Namely, that the nation is in danger, due to the boogeyman of a Baha'i fifth column, and that patriotic Iranians must rally as an Islamic nation to remove this "foreign" threat and ensure that the state reflects the identity and orientation of the nation. This is a proto-religious nationalist argument, and it contained many aspects of the religious nationalism that emerged publically in the 1960s and thereafter, but it did not yet reach the threshold of autonomous nationalism because it was still subsumed within royalism and accepted the traditionalist relationship between the Shah and the clergy, in which the Shah could be admonished about the need to enforce Islam, but executive powers remained with him.

In other words, it was a discourse on the "limits" of the nation that did not yet involve claims of "sovereignty." As noted in the previous chapter, the Shah is praised in letters warning about the Baha'i threat, and he is not himself linked to them. In these appeals, although the "Islamic nation" is lauded, it is the Shah and the majles that are called upon to play the role of saviors by removing the Baha'is. Later, in the period between 1955 and 1963 discussed in subsequent chapters, this acceptance of the

naturalness of royal rule falls away as the Shah, the Americans, the Baha'is, and the Israelis are rhetorically equated, and an autonomous Shi'ite nationalism emerges in opposition to this many-faced boogeyman.

Chehabi has questioned why the Baha'i religion has received intense hostility from secular Iranians, which is confusing given its progressive ideas and its scripture's patriotic elevation of Iran as "the noblest of nations" (*ashraf-e melal*). He proposes that this hostility is the result of the ingrained perception in most Iranians, including secular Iranians, that the Baha'is are, or were (1) a source of national division, (2) the tools of foreign powers, (3) disproportionately represented in the Pahlavi regime, and (4) cliquish and self-serving.²² This framing of anti-Baha'ism in non-religious terms has allowed the struggle against them to be phrased in nationalistic language that could appeal to secular Muslims and even other minority groups.

Interestingly, although the Islamic organizations disseminated these ideas and helped them to become ingrained in the Iranian psyche, these arguments were largely borrowed from secular intellectuals who objected to the Baha'is because of their revival of religion in Iran. The first two objections to the Baha'is that were raised by Chehabi are expressed in the writings of two of the most important Iranian historians of the 1940s, Fereydun Adamiyat and Ahmad Kasravi.

Writing in 1944, Adamiyat claims that clinging to superstition and religion instead of modern science has led to dangerous internal divisions like the emergence of the Babi-Baha'i religion. He suggests that the reason why the Baha'is were successful in

²² Chehabi, "Anatomy of Prejudice," p. 184-86.

pulling Iran backwards (contrary to the supposedly unidirectional march of progress) was that the Powers “watered its roots” and intervened to promote it within Iran.²³

In 1322 (1943/4), Kasravi also denounces Baha’ism, referring to it as just a warmed-over rehash of old Shi’ite falsehoods. He claims that Baha’is are the enemies of the people (*mardom*), and that they try to achieve communal success by destroying the nation.²⁴ This binary that Kasravi created—between the “people” and the Baha’is—slowly became a recurring motif in clerical anti-Baha’i literature from the 1940s onwards, and is treated in detail in Chapter VI. The Islamic movement’s use of Kasravi is deeply ironic, especially so because of the Feda’iyan-e Islam’s role in the dissemination of these borrowed ideas, since it was the Feda’iyan-e Islam that killed Kasravi for his intellectual criticisms of Shi’ism, and it was Navvab Safavi’s intense hatred for Kasravi that prompted him to form the terror group in the first place. The intense hatred for Kasravi in conservative circles led to not only his assassination, but to a series of literary refutations that necessitated a close (albeit hostile) reading of his works.²⁵ This close familiarity with his work led to the absorption of some of his ideas, including his secular-nationalist objection to Baha’ism. A similar phenomenon occurred later with the Hojjatiyeh, who engaged in intense hostile readings of Baha’i texts only to absorb and emulate many of their target’s external features.²⁶

The remaining secular objections to Baha’ism that were identified by Chehabi—their over-representation in the Pahlavi period and cliquish ways—are complicated by disagreements over who is a Baha’i and what it means to be a Baha’i. This perception of

²³ Fereydoun Adamiyat, *Amir Kabir va Iran* (Tehran: Bungah-e Azar, 1944), p. 258.

²⁴ Ahmad Kasravi, *Baha’i-gari* (Cologne, Germany: Mihr, 1996), pp 99-100.

²⁵ Khomeini’s first book, 1942’s *Kashf al-Asrar* (Uncovering of Secrets), was a refutation of Kasravi’s ideas, based on a close reading of *Asrar-e Hazar Saleh* (Secrets of a Thousand Years), written by a disciple of Kasravi.

²⁶ See Chapter VIII.

over-representation was so strong that even former Prime Minister Alam (who was the greatest defender of the Baha'is during the 1955 pogrom) suggested, in a 1973 diary entry, that Baha'is had infiltrated the realms of power to the point that half the Cabinet was said to be Baha'i.²⁷ A close reading shows that Alam is not stating this as a fact, but is instead relating a popular perception. Nevertheless, Alam's comments and those of other insiders were used—and are still used—to reinforce this perception.

Baha'i apologetic works acknowledge the success of Baha'i businessmen, such as Habib Sabet, but claim that the politicians accused of Baha'ism (such as Prime Minister Hoveyda) were not Baha'is, although they came from Baha'i backgrounds in some cases. Chehabi problematizes this stance by pointing out that while Baha'is maintain that they are a voluntary association and, as such, do not attribute Baha'i identity to those who are not enrolled members of the community, Muslims generally judge Baha'i-ness with the same criteria that is used to determine who is and is not a Muslim.²⁸ As such, Baha'i apologists largely miss the point by framing the issue in terms of official membership. Those who make accusations against Hoveyda and others do sometimes claim that these individuals had Baha'i membership, which is not true, but their main point is that these individuals who came from Baha'i backgrounds had a Baha'i *identity* of some sort, just as a lapsed catholic would likely have a Catholic identity of some sort, or a non-religious Jew may still claim Judaism as their ethnicity. Chehabi mentions Fu'ad Rohani (future head of OPEC) as an example of someone who came from a Baha'i background but who was not a Baha'i himself, by Baha'i definitions.²⁹ In 1955, however, in the midst of anti-

²⁷ Alikhani, *Yaddashtha-ye 'Alam* (Bethesda, MD: Iranbooks, 2006.), vol. 2, p. 166.

²⁸ Chehabi, "Anatomy of Prejudice," pp. 188-89.

²⁹ Ibid.

Baha'i persecutions, Rohani displayed a clear Baha'i identity in discussions with him on this matter.³⁰

There are also Muslims, like Major Arsham (discussed in subsequent chapters), who are not Baha'i and have no Baha'i ancestors, but nevertheless possess a form of Baha'i identity because they are married to Baha'is and thus have a special sensitivity and sympathy for Baha'is issues in the same way that a non-Jewish spouse of a Jewish individual may take personal offense at anti-Semitism and feel included in the targeted group although not Jewish themselves. Identity is not monochromatic, and Baha'i disavowals of certain individuals based on membership data alone have been unconvincing. Of course, many of those accused of Baha'ism had no connection whatsoever to the religion, but nevertheless found the slander difficult to shed, because of the perception that many Baha'is engaged in dissimulation.³¹

Regarding the issue of over-representation, Chehabi notes that this was not a reason for anger in and of itself, since graduates of certain schools were disproportionately represented in the circles of power without objection. In the Baha'i case, over-representation led to anger because of the perception that this power was used in a biased way, to promote cliquish interests, as well as to support and defend the corrupt status quo.³² Moreover, this power or influence was considered dangerous because Baha'is were believed to be cosmopolitan and externally-oriented rather than nationalistic. Iranian nationalism—both secular and religious—leans heavily on nativism, xenophobia, and conspiracy theories, while the Baha'is consider themselves

³⁰ See, for example, TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 16 / 55, British Consulate in Khorramshahr to FO, May 25 1955, p. 1.

³¹ Appendix III includes an extended discussion of the practice of falsely accusing opponents of Baha'ism.

³² Chehabi, "Anatomy of Prejudice," pp 190-91.

world citizens, preach the unity of nations, believe in the integration of the East and the West, and are highly critical of difference-centered nationalist ideologies. As such, they could, with little effort, be cast as the “quintessential internal Other of the nationalist imagination.”³³ Because of their world-embracing beliefs, even the sympathetic Alam refers to them as “nationless” (*bivatan*) and wonders, “Is it possible to be a... Baha’i and still have the interests of his nation at heart?”³⁴

This suspicion concerning the national loyalty of the Baha’is increased significantly following the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, which caused the headquarters of the Baha’i Faith in Haifa, Palestine to become situated in the “Zionist entity.”³⁵ This linking of Baha’is and Jews was accelerated by the creation of Israel, but was present in earlier polemic during the 1940s. A September 1946 article in *Parcham-e Islam*, for example, claims that the reason why so many Jews converted to the Baha’i

³³ Ibid., pp. 192-94.

³⁴ Alikhani, *Yaddashtha-ye ‘Alam*, Vol. 2, pp. 166, 362 [quoted in Chehabi, “Anatomy of Prejudice,” pp. 188-93]. It should be noted that despite the repeated charges that the Baha’is were “nationless” and were rootless cosmopolitans, the founders of the Baha’i Faith were proud Iranians whose writings were full of patriotic praise for their homeland. Baha’u’llah’s book of laws (*al-Kitab al-Aqdas*, c. 1873) includes the promise that in the future Iran will be ruled by a tolerant republic controlled by the people (verses 91-93). On occasion, Baha’u’llah demonstrated his love and appreciation of Persian culture by writing in “pure Persian” (i.e. not using any Arabic loan words, which is exceedingly difficult since modern Persian is infused with words of Arabic origin) in works such as the *Tablet of Seven Questions (Lawh-e Haft Porsesh)*. With Baha’u’llah’s support, his son Abdu’l-Baha wrote an extended essay (*Resaleh-ye Madaniyeh*, c. 1875, known in English as *The Secret of Divine Civilization*) in which he critiqued the political environment in Iran and suggested a number of reforms (instituting elections, mass education, legal reform, and so on) for the good of the nation. Baha’is and Azalis (Babis who did not accept Baha’u’llah) were also involved in Iran’s Constitutional Revolution and other political movements. Admittedly, things changed after 1921, since Shoghi Effendi’s focus was global and he forbid involvement in Iranian politics. Likewise, the Universal House of Justice has chosen not to get involved in any political movements in Iran (or elsewhere).

³⁵ As previously discussed, the Baha’i headquarters is in Haifa (Israel) because that is where the religion’s founder died in 1892, having been sent there as a political prisoner of the Ottoman Empire. Obviously, this cannot rightly be seen as anything other than an historical accident. Yet, this issue has been repeatedly used in anti-Baha’i polemic as evidence that Baha’is are Zionists and Israeli spies.

Faith is that the two groups are so similar in their methodology and fabrications, and that “In whatever country they reside, [Baha’is] and Jews commit involuntary treachery.”³⁶

American support for both Iran and Israel, and increasing American involvement in Iran, heightened suspicions in this regard, since anti-Baha’i activists had an exaggerated perception of the size and influence of the Baha’i community in the United States, and were fearful that the Baha’is would convince America to hand Iran over to them, just as—they believed—the Jews in the West were able to have Palestine given to them. Whereas Baha’is were attacked earlier in the 1940s as the creation of foreign powers, to create internal divisions in Iran, in the post-1948 period they were described as the active agents of Zionism and America, colonialism’s advance guard. This led to the conflation of anti-Bahaism and anti-Zionism, and the development of “Jews and Baha’is” as a paired target. The blending of anti-Semitism and anti-Baha’ism also led to anti-Jewish tales being re-imagined and repurposed against the Baha’is. This can be seen in the fabricated episode related in the memoirs of Ayatollah Mas’udi Khomeini, in which Baha’is are said to kill Muslim children during the mourning for Imam Husayn during Ashura, which is a rehashing of traditional blood libels that attributed such behavior to Jews at Easter, with Christian children.³⁷

The most important reason why Baha’is came to “constitute the internal Other” for both religious and secular Iranians, according to Chehabi, is that—in the period after the Second World War—the majority of the population internalized and naturalized the idea that “to be a ‘true’ Iranian... one has to be at least culturally from a Twelver Shi’i

³⁶ Tavakoli-Targhi, “Anti-Baha’ism and Islamism in Iran,” pp. 220-21.

³⁷ Mas’udi Khomeini, *Khaterat-e Ayatollah Mas’udi Khomeini*, Javad Emami ed. (Tehrān: Markaz-e Asnad-e Inqilab-e Islami, 2002), pp. 229-30. For more information, see Sen Mcglinn, “The Blood Libel: Qom Variant,” accessed 15 February 2011, <http://sensday.wordpress.com/2010/05/25/blood-libel-qom/>.

background.” He supports this claim by referring to Najmabadi’s observation that “Iranian modernity has not openly and explicitly inscribed Baha’is in the category Iranian.”³⁸

Chehabi is correct up to a point, but Baha’is were placed on the other end of this binary structure not because they were the minority most culturally different from the majority, but because they were the one that was most *similar*. Not only were Baha’is indistinguishable based on names, appearance, language, or location, but the Babi-Baha’i tradition was itself an offshoot of Shi’ism, maintaining many of its aspects in modernized form to become, as MacEoin puts it (with relation to Babism), a through-the-looking-glass version of Shi’ism that had “delved to the depths of Islam and came out on the other side de-Islamicized.”³⁹ Fischer also claims that Baha’is were uniquely problematic for Shi’ism because “the idiom of Bahaism is so close to that of Islam that it denies the normal construction of significance that Muslims place on their idiom.”⁴⁰ This brings us back to Kasravi’s argument that Baha’ism is just a new take on Shi’ism (feigning modernity while being culturally the same as its earlier form), which attacks the Baha’is not for being dissimilar to Shi’ites, but for being too similar.

Chehabi’s formulation is incomplete, as it is not sufficient to say that the masses internalized and naturalized the idea that one must be “culturally from a Twelver Shi’i background.” It may be more accurate to say that the masses naturalized the idea that to be Iranian meant that one opposed Baha’ism, since the idea that Iran’s unmarked national

³⁸ Chehabi, “Anatomy of Prejudice,” p. 195; Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Women with Mustaches and Men without Beards: Gender and Sexual Anxieties of Iranian Modernity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 299 n41.

³⁹ MacEoin, *The Messiah of Shiraz*, p. 646.

⁴⁰ Fischer, *Iran*, p. 187.

identity is Shi'ite (the founding myth of Shi'ite nationalism in Iran) is, and has been, inseparably intertwined with the concomitant marking of Baha'ism as a foreign threat.

Borujerdi and the anti-Baha'i lobby

According to Rasul Jafarian, in the decade after the abdication of Reza Shah, two “major dangers” faced the Muslims in Iran. The first was the (Communist) Tudeh party, while the second was the Baha'i religion, “about which the believers have a sensitivity (*hesasiyat dashtan*) that is singular and unique (*tanha va tanha*).”⁴¹ The Baha'is were believed to have infiltrated the governmental bureaucracy since the Reza Shah period, but it was not until his abdication that action could be taken to protest this development. The danger from Communism was considered more important before 1953 but, after the dismantling of Tudeh following the coup to remove Mosaddeq, Baha'ism came to be seen as the most serious danger to Iranian Muslims.⁴²

As Shi'ism's leading *marja'* (the highest rank of religious authority), Ayatollah Borujerdi became the ultimate source of appeal for action against the Baha'is, with a flood (*sayl*) of complaints regularly reaching him about this matter. As a result of this pressure from below, he came to intensely oppose the Baha'is.⁴³ According to his student and biographer, Ali Davani, Borujerdi was initially hopeful that by admonishing the government he could awaken it to “the danger that comes from the direction of the Baha'is” and that this would lead to action to prevent “their influence in the governmental establishment, their arrogant conceits, revolutionary sedition (*ashub*), and riotous disturbances (*balva*).” After communication with the shifting governments of the

⁴¹ Jafarian, *Jaryanha va Sazmanha*, p. 368.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 369.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, pp. 163-64.

time, however, Borujerdi sensed either apathy or support for the Baha'is in the majles and the Cabinet, and began to consider his admonitions and the polite replies that they received to be a pointless exercise. In a letter to Falsafi, he claimed that the lack of a decisive response from the majles was evidence that "the development of the infiltration and consolidation (*nofuz va taqveyat*) of this sect [in the state administration], in terms of its purpose and intention, is conscious and deliberate" and was not a lapse or oversight on the part of the majles. What rare anti-Baha'i efforts came from the majles, he maintained, were "mere pretense and deception, lacking reality." Leading him to conclude that "in this matter, all I see is nonsense and idle talk."⁴⁴

Despite his disillusionment, Borujerdi was able to achieve limited dismissals of some Bahais employed by the government during the Razmara administration (July 1950-March 1951). He successfully convinced Minister of Culture Jaza'iri to inform the Cabinet that Muslims were unhappy because the Baha'is were engaging in "political demonstrations."⁴⁵ When this message was delivered, it was brushed aside with the decision to send a circular to the governors re-affirming that the Baha'is were not a recognized minority group. The Minister of Culture, despite this dismissal of the issue, decided to independently dismiss or demote Baha'i employees who refused his instruction to affirm "Muslim" as their religious identity.⁴⁶

Part of the problem Borujerdi faced in winning governmental support for strong anti-Baha'i action was that, before Mosaddeq, Iran's leadership was nebulous and

⁴⁴ Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat*, p. 198 n1.

⁴⁵ Communal political demonstrations are forbidden in the Baha'i Faith. What Borujerdi is actually objecting to is outward and open manifestation of a Baha'i identity, which the Baha'i leadership did call for in this period. Seeing a "political protest" in not hiding one's non-conformist identity is like perceiving a "homosexual agenda" whenever a gay person publicly acknowledges their identity. It speaks to the anxieties of a threatened group within the mainstream and is not an indication of any overt political action by the feared Other.

⁴⁶ Tavakoli-Targhi, "Anti-Baha'ism and Islamism in Iran," pp. 213-15.

shifting. The Shah had little influence and was not directly involved in government, while those who wielded political authority did so tenuously and briefly. This can be seen in an episode in which, having lost faith in the majles, Borujerdi sent Ruhollah Khomeini to ask the Shah to intervene to make sure that some Muslims who had murdered Baha'is would not be held accountable for their crime. Khomeini informed the Shah that in the time of his father, Reza Shah, the Baha'is had been kept "in their place" and now the people (*mardom*) expected the same from him. In reply,

this youth (the Shah) heaved a sigh and said: "Mr. Khomeini! Do not compare now to that time! That time all of the ministers and all of the nation's dignitaries were obedient to my father. They were not courageous enough to offend him, but now even the Minister of Court does not obey me! So, how can I take this action?"⁴⁷

When Mosaddeq became Iran's unrivaled political authority (1951-53), Borujerdi initially had high hopes about the prospect of anti-Baha'i action. He sent Falsafi, to meet with Mosaddeq and explain that the Grand Ayatollah was receiving constant complaints about Baha'i activities and desired strong governmental action to remedy the Baha'i problem. Falsafi informed the Prime Minister of "the danger of Baha'ism" and told him that "the Baha'is were gradually coming to be considered part of the nation (*mellat*) of Iran, and the possessors of rights equal to those of Muslims."⁴⁸ He was shocked when Mosaddeq responding with laughter and a "mocking" dismissal. This shock turned to astonishment when Mosaddeq's told him that "there is no difference between Muslims and Baha'is. They are all one nation and Iranian." Falsafi, sensing the firmness of the

⁴⁷ Habib Ladjevardi, ed., *Khaterat-e Dr. Mehdi Ha'eri-Yazdi* (Cambridge, Mass.: Center for Middle Eastern Studies, Harvard University, 2001), pp. 56-57; Khomeini, *Khaterat-e Ayatollah Mas'udi Khomeini*, pp. 228-29; this involvement by Ruhollah Khomeini is challenged by Abo'l-Qasem Khazali, *Khaterat-e Ayatollah Abo'l-Qasem Khazali* (Intisharat-e Markaz-e Asnad-e Inqilab-e Islami, 2003), p. 58.

⁴⁸ Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat*, p. 200.

Prime Minister's convictions in this matter, dropped the issue and relayed his failure to Borujerdi, who received the news of the Prime Minister's pronouncement on the Baha'is with shock and disbelief.⁴⁹ Hojjat al-Islam Qannatabadi and others have linked the clerical turn against Mosaddeq not only to his support for the Left and failure to implement Islamic reforms—as per the standard narrative—but also to his support for the Baha'is, which led to paranoia that he planned to deliver Iran to the perceived twin poles of irreligion, the Communists and the Baha'is.⁵⁰

Despite his disillusionment, Borujerdi continued to admonish the government to little effect, and this pattern continued after the CIA-sponsored coup of 1953, which replaced Mosaddeq with Zahedi. Although Zahedi was grateful to the clerical hierarchy for their opposition to Mosaddeq, he continued the practice of shunting action on the Baha'i question, this time on the excuse that the remnants of Tudeh must first be crushed and oil negotiations completed. In a June 9, 1954 letter to Falsafi, Borujerdi laments the government's indecision on the Baha'i matter and claims that this has led to a Baha'i takeover of the oil operations in Abadan (an allusion to the aforementioned Rohani, among others). He instructs Falsafi to seek a meeting with the Shah, but says, "I do not believe that even a little will be gained. This lowly one is completely out of hope for the rectification of this country." He bemoans the fate of Iran if action is not taken on the Baha'i question:

I do not know where the conditions in Iran will lead! It is as if the leaders of Iran have fallen into such a deep sleep that no sound—however horrible it is—can wake them up.... This lowly one sees the affairs of Iran facing grave danger due to this sect. They are given so much access into the government bureaucracy, and

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 138-39.

⁵⁰ Ali Rahnama, *Niruha-ye Mazhabi bar Bestar-e Harakat-e Nehzat-e Melli* (Tehran: Gam-Naw Publishing, 2004), p. 996.

have come to dominate affairs so much... I do not know with whom one must speak and what bell one must ring to awaken the sleeping ones.⁵¹

The frustration of the early Zahedi period coincided with Baha'i plans for unprecedented global expansion, which featured prominent plans for Iran, including the goal of doubling the number of Baha'i communities within Iran. This was part of a global campaign of expansion, from 1953-63, that the leader of the Baha'is (Shoghi Effendi Rabbani) called the "Ten Year Crusade." Part of this "Crusade" involved the construction of a handful of prominent "Mother Temples," or "Houses of Worship," which were to be built at strategically important locations—including Iran—to mark the opening up of the world to the Baha'i religion.⁵²

Those with strong anti-Baha'i views saw this planned Temple as the equivalent of a territorial claim on Iran, which threatened their view of Iran as the stronghold of Shi'ism. The Temple was also problematic because of Iranian Shi'ism's concern with maintaining its hegemony over the sacred skyline by restricting the ability of minority groups to build or expand their places of worship in a way that would appear to threaten the structural dominance of Shi'ism. The idea that the Tehran skyline would be embellished with a prominent Baha'i temple symbolizing the "conquering" of Iran was too much for some to take. There was a strong feeling that something had to be done immediately to prevent this.

⁵¹ Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat*, p. 199.

⁵² For more information on the Crusade, see: Rabbani, *Messages to the Baha'i World: 1950-57* (Wilmette, IL: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1971), pp. 40-45.

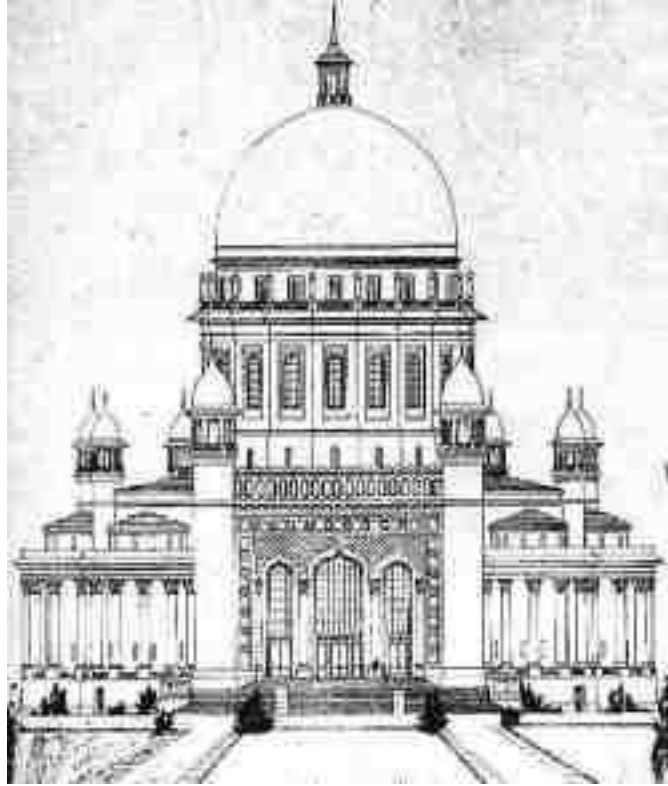


Figure 3. 1. The planned Baha'i temple in Tehran.

Kill them, where possible

In light of the government's failure to respond to calls for action against the Baha'is, there were a number of instances in which local anti-Baha'i activists attempted to remove Baha'i *nofuuz* (influence, infiltration) themselves, often with the incitement and support of the clergy. These violent episodes during the 1940s were outlined in an extensive October 23, 1951 letter from the Baha'i community to the Iranian government, written on the advice of Mosaddeq. This document traces an extended narrative of murder, assault, looting, mutilation, desecration, arson, and verbal and sexual humiliation at the hands of the clergy and "crazed mobs" under their sway, with the government, security forces, and

general public either ignoring, enabling, or joining in the persecution.⁵³ These persecutions occurred sporadically in rural areas, with no national co-ordination, and tended to be chronologically clustered around the periods of greatest social stress—such as the end of the War and the politically chaotic years immediately before Mosaddeq’s premiership. The anti-Baha’i pogrom of 1955, treated in later chapters, differed from the persecutions of this period not so much in its content—with virtually every form of persecution outlined in this 1951 letter repeated in 1955—but in terms of its centralized organization, national scope, and formal governmental participation.

Borujerdi indirectly supported anti-Baha’i violence. This approach is consistent with his previously mentioned approach to Tudeh, in which he expressed disdain for directly calling for violence that would lead to bloodshed in the streets, instead preferring to keep his hands clean by utilizing the more violent Islamic organizations. Because of this preference for indirect involvement, sources disagree about his attitude regarding autonomous action the Baha’is. According to a student of his, Ayatollah Ahmadi-Shahrudi, Borujerdi approved of the extra-judicial killing of Baha’is. Before sending out his deputies to preach against the Baha’is, he reportedly instructed them that they should kill the Baha’is where possible.⁵⁴ According to Ayatollah Montazeri, however, Borujerdi’s focus was not on murder but on segregating Baha’is from Muslim society. Montazeri recalls how, in obedience to this mandate, he gathered together representatives from different classes and professions in Najafabad (such as bakers and taxi drivers) and made each group pledge not to sell to, or provide services for, Baha’is. As a result, it was

⁵³ NSA of the Baha’is of the United States, letter to Prime Minister Mosaddeq, October 23, 1951 [cited in Choubine, *Dr. Muhammad Musaddiq and the Baha’is*, pp. 37-43].

⁵⁴ Ghulam-Rida Karbaschi, *Tarikh-e Shefahi-ye Enqelab-e Islami: Tarikh-e Hawzah-e ‘Elmiyeh-ye Qom* (Tehran: Markaz Asnad Inqilab Islami, 2001), pp. 161-62.

said that—even if he pleaded—a Baha’i was not able to even catch a taxi, even if he offered fifty times the standard fare.⁵⁵

It should be noted that, although it was claimed that the clergy were voicing the will of the people when they spoke out against the Baha’is, at the local level the people were often admonished by Borujerdi’s representatives and guided into the expressions of anger against the Baha’is that had supposedly originated with them. The clerical center at Qom sent itinerant preachers to the provinces to inspire local action vis-à-vis the Baha’i issue. Ayatollah Khalisizadeh, for example, gave a speech to the people of Yazd in which he chastised them, asking mockingly: “People (*mardom*)! What kind of Muslims are you?”⁵⁶ He then “outed” various successful local men who were Baha’is (including the head of the Chamber of Commerce, a prominent merchant, and the head of the local telephone company), all the while repeating the taunt “What kind of Muslims are you?” impugning the audience’s manhood for allowing this Baha’i infiltration.⁵⁷

Despite the shame that he claimed the audience should feel, Khalisizadeh urged temporary restraint when it came to taking action against the Baha’is, as a matter of strategy, until the support of the government could be obtained. In the meantime, he echoed the calls for segregation mentioned by Montazeri, but suggested that this was only strategic. Khalisizadeh warns the people:

⁵⁵ Montazeri, *Matn-e Kamel*, p. 94.

⁵⁶ Jafarian, *Jaryanha va Sazmanha*, p. 167.

⁵⁷ Khalisizadeh links the *nofuz* (influence, infiltration) of the Baha’is with the emasculation of the citizenry. It should be noted that *nofuz* can also imply penetration, and the obsession with its occurrence and with preventing its occurrence can be read as a form of penetration anxiety and a fear of emasculation either through being penetrated or through allowing this to occur to what is under one’s rightful protection. The entry of the Baha’is into the nation’s power centers was an act resulting in shame and necessitating corrective steps whereby honor could be regained and authority re-established through a masculine show of force. In many ways, the killing of Baha’is in the 1940s and 1950s can be read as a form of honor killing, at a national level.

You must only cut off business transactions and social intercourse with them. Business dealings with them are forbidden (*haram*) until, with the aid of the government, I will be able to proceed to annihilate (*az bayn bordan*) this religion... the government will eradicate them (*az bayn bordan*), and the first thing to be destroyed will be Tehran's National Baha'i Center (Haziratu'l-Quds).⁵⁸

This anticipated governmental action would take far longer than Khalisizadeh envisioned, but his speech reveals the long-gestating strategy to slowly obtain governmental support for widespread violence, and the early priorities for what would be targeted once this support was eventually obtained. The identification of the Baha'i National Center as the initial target for governmental intervention can also be seen in similar early calls by Ayatollah Kashani and by Iran's Society of Worshipers.⁵⁹ As a result, rumors of the imminent destruction of the Haziratu'l-Quds (National Baha'i Center) were in circulation since May 1948.⁶⁰

In addition to the activities of the mainstream clergy, the Feda'iyān-e Islam also began to take autonomous action against the perceived Baha'i threat. After their assassination of Minister Hāzīr in 1949—in part due to accusations of Baha'ism—Navvab Safavi hid near Qazvin and Taleqan and, while in these areas, continued to speak out against the Baha'is threat. Some of the Feda'is in the area, motivated by Safavi, used shovels and pickaxes to murder a Baha'i landlord in a village near Qazvin. Those arrested for the murder were not tried until early 1953. During this trial, the Feda'iyān rallied to the support of the accused and were able to raise approximately 400,000 *tomans* in the bazaar to support their accused brethren. As a result of intense pressure by the Feda'iyān, the accused were freed and, to celebrate, six sheep were sacrificed in front of

⁵⁸ Jafarian, *Jaryanha va Sazmanha*, p. 168.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Tavakoli-Targhi, "Anti-Baha'ism and Islamism in Iran," p. 215.

the courthouse and a night of celebration was organized in which several hundred members engaged in revelry into the middle of the night, led by Safavi himself.⁶¹

The “Martyrs” of Abarqu and the murder of Dr. Berjis

On January 3, 1950 a middle-aged woman (Soghra) and her five children were slaughtered in the outskirts of Abarqu (just over 200 km from Yazd). All evidence indicates that the murders were ordered by a wealthy local landlord (Isfandiyar Salari) who held a grudge against the old woman and wanted revenge (since she had steered a widow he desired into a relationship with another man). This is how *Dad* initially reported the case. Later, influential associates of Salari protected him and used Baha’is as scapegoats for the crime (despite the fact that there were no Baha’is in the area). Without cause, Baha’is from nearby areas were arrested, as were those falsely believed to be Baha’i, as well as all nine members of the administrative council of the Baha’is of Yazd. In order to make the Baha’i explanation work, Soghra was re-imagined as a pious Muslim hero who was brutally slaughtered because of her brave and pious words against the Baha’is.⁶²

This scapegoating of the Baha’is was accompanied by a great deal of fear-mongering and propaganda, which resulted in an increase in anti-Baha’i sentiment and violence in Yazd. In March 1951, for example, a dead body was discovered and, based on nothing, it was claimed that the Baha’is had murdered the man. His coffin was paraded around by youth who lamented the death and spoke against the evils of the

⁶¹ Choubine, *Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq va Baha’ian*, pp. 19-21.

⁶² See: Vahman, *160 Sal Mobarezeh ba A’in-e Baha’i*, pp. 221-40; Muhammad-Taqi Afnan, *Bigunahan* (unpublished manuscript), Section II; for an expanded analysis, see: Choubine, *Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq va Baha’ian*.

Baha'is. This increased tension also led to the murder of Barham Rohani, as well as several attacks on Baha'i properties.⁶³

According to Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi, anger over the Abarqu murder was also the chief motivating factor for the killing shortly thereafter of a Baha'i doctor in Kashan.⁶⁴ Dr. Sulayman Berjis (1897–1950) was one of the most prominent doctors in Kashan and came from a family of Jewish physicians that had converted to the Baha'i Faith. Towards the end of his life, he spent a great deal of his time making house calls to provide medical care and dispense prescriptions, often at nominal charge.⁶⁵ This practice was exploited when, on February 3, 1950, he was lured to the place where he was murdered through a fictitious story about a sick individual in need of treatment.⁶⁶

Upon arriving, he was told to recant his religion or face death. He attempted to flee, but was caught and dismembered, with more than eighty wounds inflicted to his body. The murderers then proceeded on a victory march through the bazaar, praising God and claiming to have killed a “murderer.”⁶⁷ Some observers showed support by closing their shops to join in the procession, which reportedly came to number in the thousands. Eventually, the murderers arrived at the police station and proudly announced that they had killed the leader of the Baha'is in fulfillment of their religious obligation.⁶⁸

After they were arrested, a large crowd gathered to protest their imprisonment and the

⁶³ Shoghi Effendi Rabbani, ed., *The Baha'i World*, Vol. XII (Wilmette, IL: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1981), p. 705.

⁶⁴ Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat*, p.198.

⁶⁵ Ruhollah Mehrabkhani, “Shahadat-e Dr. Berjis,” *Ahang-e Badi'*, vol. 4 no. 17 (1950): pp. 6, 7, 20.

⁶⁶ Vahman, *160 Sal Mobarezeh ba A'in-e Baha'i*, pp. 186-220

⁶⁷ The murderers' claim that Dr. Berjis was a “murderer” provides another example of the transposition of the tropes of anti-Semitism onto Baha'i targets following 1948. In the libel against Dr. Berjis, he was accused of killing hundreds of Muslims by delivering poison to them and pretending that it was medicine. This was a slightly altered version of similar accusations that were made against Jewish pharmacists fifteen years earlier as part of a campaign against Iranian Jews (Tavakoli-Targhi, “Anti-Baha'ism and Islamism in Iran,” pp. 212-13).

⁶⁸ Nasser Mohajer, “Kard-Ajin Kardan Dr. Birjis,” *Baran* 19/20 (Spring and Summer 2008): pp. 13-14.

streets of Kashan became chaotic until security forces dispersed the crowd by firing warning shots into the air.

The leader of those who confessed to the crime was Muhammad Rasolzadeh, a dye and silk salesman, while the other three men with him were youth between sixteen and twenty. Upon interrogation, the four openly admitted to killing Berjis because he was an “infidel” who sought to spread his religion to Muslims. They maintained that the act of murder was legal because they had been carrying out their religious duty by acting in obedience to a *fatwa* (authoritative religious decree) by the most learned cleric of the age. They refused to say who they considered this to be.

There are some indications that the four men were part of the Feda’iyan-e Islam, and that they even announced this affiliation following the murder.⁶⁹ Regardless of membership, the men had clearly been influenced by both the Feda’iyan and the itinerant anti-Baha’i preachers that had been moving through the area. Among these were firebrands such as Ahmadi-Shahrudi and Turabi. These individuals spoke, as Borujerdi’s representatives, at nearby gatherings of the Islamic Propagation Association (Anjoman-e Tablighat-e Islami), and even organized a new sub-division of the Association, which was specifically aimed at combating the Baha’is. They were joined in these efforts by other traveling preachers, such as the aforementioned Khalisizadeh, who traveled around Iran inspiring young men to get involved in religio-political activism, especially against the Baha’is. These individuals and groups repeatedly stirred up violence against the Baha’is in the area.⁷⁰ While in Kashan, Khalisizadeh had announced from the pulpit that

⁶⁹ Ali Davani, *Nehzat-e Rohaniyun-e Iran* (Tehran: Bunyad-e Farhangi-e Imam Reza, 1980), pp. 555-56; and Choubine, *Dr. Muhammad Musaddiq and the Baha’is*, pp. 68-74. This is disputed in Mohajer, “Kard-‘ajin Kardan-e Dr. Berjis,” pp. 10-24.

⁷⁰ Mohajer, “Kard-‘ajin Kardan-e Dr. Berjis,” pp. 11-13.

Dr. Berjis was the leader of the local Baha'is and should be killed, which led to a series of attacks on Baha'i properties. This escalation leading up to the murder even involved the decapitation of Dr. Berjis's horse, on the rationale that a Baha'i should not ride a horse while Muslims walk.⁷¹ Khalisizadeh's call for the death of Dr. Berjis, while there as representative of Borujerdi, could have been seen by the murderers as the equivalent of a *fatwa* by Borujerdi for the death of Dr. Berjis.

Borujerdi, Behbahani, and Kashani all intensely pressured the government to release the murderers of Dr. Berjis. The Ministry of the Interior reported daily lobbying regarding this matter. These efforts were organized out of Qom, where special committees were set up to train and direct regional lobbying efforts designed to give the impression of a flood of support for the accused from every region in the country. This strategy had earlier been employed successfully to prevent the execution and ensure the freedom of Abdu'r-Rahim Rabbani-Shirazi after he killed a Baha'i leader in Sarvestan. Navvab Safavi, the leader of the much-feared Feda'iyan-e Islam, also got personally involved and swore to prevent the execution of those who had killed Dr. Berjis. Faced with intense pressure, Tehran's criminal court dismissed the charges against the defendants, although they had openly and proudly claimed credit for the murder. After the acquittal, there was "an unseemly display of jubilation at the house of a leading cleric and there was for a time wild talk about burning down the Baha'i [headquarters] in Tehran."⁷²

⁷¹ Choubine, *Dr. Muhammad Musaddiq and the Baha'is*, pp. 68-74.

⁷² TNAPRO, FO 371 / 82309 / EP 1013/ 48, Tehran monthly report, September – October, 1950.

“Baha’is have been killing the people”

While in America, Prime Minister Mosaddeq met with American Bahais and promised to personally do all that he could to assist the Baha’is falsely accused of the Abarqu murders. He claimed to already know of the details of the case as a result of a meeting with Major-General Ala’i, a Bahai, who had discussed the issue with him. Before he could help them, however, Mosaddeq suggested that the American Baha’is first send the Iranian government a detailed appeal fully describing the persecution of Baha’is in Iran. He personally dictated the conclusion that this appeal should arrive at: “We wonder that in a country which has an ancient civilization and possesses constitutional laws, a group of people is treated in a manner which conflicts with these fundamental laws. The latter proclaim that the people are equal before law.”⁷³ Despite this promise, Mosaddeq apparently did not intervene, since by the time that the verdict was delivered he was distracted by larger issues and could not afford to spend political capital in this area.

Ayatollah Borujerdi was deeply distressed about the events in Abarqu and feared that the Mosaddeq regime would free the accused Baha’is. According to his biographer and student, Ali Davani, the Grand Ayatollah sincerely believed that the Baha’is were guilty of the crime.⁷⁴ As a result, in the pursuit of what he saw as justice, it was said that he did not take a moment’s rest and would constantly send appeals to Tehran to see that the Baha’i “killers” paid for their bloodthirsty murder of this elderly Muslim woman and her innocent children.

On another occasion, he similarly lobbied to have charges dismissed against a Muslim charged with the murder of a Baha’i. On this other occasion he too lost sleep and

⁷³ Choubine, *Dr. Muhammad Musaddiq and the Baha’is*, pp 34-35.

⁷⁴ Even now, many Iranian writers continue to ignore all historical evidence and maintain that the Baha’is committed the Abarqu murders. See, for example, Jafarian, *Jaryanha*, p. 164.

lobbied persistently for the murderer to be freed, claiming that until he was assured of success, his entire body trembled and he was consumed by worry, lest an innocent Muslim die on account of his failure.⁷⁵

According to an attorney involved in the 1952 trial of the Baha'is accused of the Abarqu murders, Borujerdi raised over 700,000 *tomans* to pay for the lawyers to represent the family of the Muslim victims, but Ayatollah Behbahani refused to pay anything over 2000 *tomans* to each lawyer, pocketing almost all of the remaining funds. The lawyer explained that fear-mongering over the Baha'i issue was a handy issue with which to raise a small fortune each year, and that as long as such sums of money could be raised, each year the clergy would accuse a Baha'i for having murdered someone and—on the pretext of hiring tort attorneys—collect and pocket large sums.”⁷⁶ This assessment fails to take into account the large sums that were spent by Behbahani in other areas related to the trial, such as funding daily gatherings denouncing the Baha'is. There was also the matter of payments to individuals such as ‘Amidi-Nuri, the editor of *Dad*, who had initially reported the true nature of the crime, but who, after being hired by Ayatollah Behbahani, joined those scapegoating Baha'is. In addition, there were the payments to be made to those who were hired to sit in the courtroom and constantly disrupt proceedings, intimidate the defendants, and repeatedly call for their execution. Over a thousand people filled the court during the trial, and a large percentage of this crowd was being paid 3 *tomans* a day to actively support the prosecution. These

⁷⁵ Choubine, *Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq va Baha'ian*, pp. 37-38.

⁷⁶ Afnan, *Bigunahan*, pp. 155-56.

individuals also accosted and threatened the defense attorneys, leading one to resign in fear.⁷⁷

To compensate for the lack of evidence, the accused were tried not on the specifics of the case, but on the basis of their identity as Baha'is. One prosecuting attorney claimed that “for fifty years, Baha'is have been killing the people,” and that executions are necessary or “the people will take their own revenge.”⁷⁸ In other words, the Baha'is were guilty of crimes not against the specific victims, but against “people,” which is to say Muslims. The “fifty years” is a reference to 1903, when the Baha'is of Yazd were severely persecuted, and dozens were killed.⁷⁹ In the intervening fifty years, there was relative peace and the slow regeneration of the Baha'i community in the area.

The claim that the Baha'is have been killing the people for half a century is a ludicrous fabrication if taken literally, but this accusation is useful if examined metaphorically. Looked at from this perspective, it can be argued that it is the continued Baha'i presence in the area after 1903, this mere existence, which is framed as a “killing” act against the people. This “killing” may also allude to the expansion of the Baha'i community, which was seen as a zero-sum operation, in which the animation of the Other is perceived as the decimation of the self.

Another attorney, approaching the issue less elliptically, claimed that fifty years ago, before the Constitution, Baha'is could be legally killed on the basis of clerical *fatwas*, and that this happened on hundreds of occasions, but that under the Constitution the state was now in control of capital punishment and that the clergy could no longer

⁷⁷ Firuz Kazemzadeh, “The 1952 and 1954 Trials of Baha'is from Yazd, Iran,” *World Order* 38:3 (2008): p.7; Choubine, *Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq va Baha'ian*, pp. 39-43.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ Fischer, *Debating Muslims*, pp. 222-50; Ahang Rabbani, ““Abdu'l-Baha's Proclamation on the Persecution of Baha'is in 1903,” *Baha'i Studies Review* 14 (2007): 53–67.

legally pronounce death for Baha'i membership. The court, however, still had this power and should exercise it by using the justification of a guilty verdict to "eradicate these people."⁸⁰ In other words, the trial was explicitly framed as a way to obtain a legal precedent to support the clerical claim that Baha'is remained *mahdur ad-damm* (ones who could be killed without fear of legal repercussions).

The Feda'iyān-e Islam joined Borujerdi's efforts to seek the execution of the Baha'i defendants for the murders in Abarqu. Every day, members would distribute pamphlets outside of the trial, spreading the word about the murders, sensationalizing the trial, and promising autonomous action if the Baha'is were to be freed. The elderly Soghra, murdered on the order of a wealthy landlord for facilitating the object of his affection's relationship with another man, was re-imagined in the Feda'iyān's propaganda as "our Muslim Sister," and a "meek Muslim lady" who was ripped to pieces by "shameless" Baha'is. In a leaflet distributed in connection with the trial, the top of the page depicts the elderly woman and her innocent children resting peacefully, while the bottom of the page shows their slaughtered bodies, leading to a strong and negative emotional reaction in the readership.⁸¹ Soghra and her young children were elevated to the rank of "blood-soaked martyrs" in the struggle between the "Muslim nation" and the Baha'is.⁸²

It is this national dimension to the Feda'iyān's propaganda that is especially important for our purposes. Several years later, in the anti-Baha'i pogrom of 1955, Borujerdi and the mainstream clergy pick up this usage vis-à-vis the Baha'is, but it was

⁸⁰ Choubine, *Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq va Baha'ian*, pp. 39-43.

⁸¹ Kazemzadeh, "The 1952 and 1954 Trials," pp. 8-9.

⁸² Choubine, *Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq va Baha'ian*, p 40.

the Islamic associations (especially the Feda'iyān) that pioneered this framing of the Baha'i issue in explicitly national terms.

The Feda'iyān's propaganda tracts relating to the Abarqu trial begin with the assertion that Iran is an Islamic nation and that, as such, the battle against the Baha'is is not waged as Muslims qua Muslims, but rather as the citizenry (*mardom*) of an Islamic "nation" who are attacking Baha'is not for being heretical, but rather for being "unpatriotic." Unlike Mosaddeq's pronouncement that the category "Iranian" included Baha'is as well as Muslims, the Feda'iyān believed that Shi'ism was the essential and unchanging identity of the nation that formed the state. As such, their pamphlets denounced the treachery of the "nationless" (*bivatan*) Baha'is.⁸³ The push for the execution of the defendants was in many ways an excuse to let the Baha'is know that they were not part of Iran, and should be removed from it violently.

Attorneys bypassed discussions of evidence to instead read and ridicule Baha'i holy books and rehash a variety of baseless conspiracies and libels.⁸⁴ In response, the paid seat-fillers would erupt into riotous applause to signal approval of every slander made against the Baha'is. As part of the spectacle, one attorney actually spent forty minutes reading aloud most of *The Memoirs of Kinyaz Dolgorouki*, which holds a place in anti-Baha'i polemic that is comparable to the position that *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* holds in anti-Semitic literature.⁸⁵

On May 27, 1952, after nearly three weeks, the trial concluded. All of the defendants were found guilty and four were condemned to death while the others were to

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Kazemzadeh, "The 1952 and 1954 Trials," pp. 8-9.

⁸⁵ For more about this 1943 fabrication, see Mīna Yazdani, "I'tirāfāt-i Dolgorouki: qiṣṣah pardāzī va huviyyat sāzī," *Iran Nameh* 24:4 (2009): pp. 196-206.

serve extended terms of imprisonment with hard labor. After an appeal process, only one person was executed, an innocent local Muslim wrongly believed to be a Baha'i, while the (actual) Baha'is from neighboring areas served jail sentences of three to ten years, with one elderly Baha'i dying in prison.⁸⁶

Conclusion

Baha'is represented a genuine threat to Shi'ite primacy because of their intense proselytizing and demonstrated ability to win converts if allowed to operate freely.⁸⁷ In this sense, the Baha'i threat was real. The danger of Baha'ism that was rhetorically conjured, however, was not. The threat of Baha'i sedition against the state was—and is—a MacGuffin, an excuse for collective action and further Islamicization. The specter of Baha'ism was a boogeyman that could be rolled out to distract from the failures and fissures of the movement for “Islamic Iran.” By the early 1950s, after a decade of impassioned activity, only nominal progress had been made towards the original goals of the Islamic movement (such as implementing the ignored Islamic provisions in the supplemental laws, or banning the more odious aspects of Western cultural imperialism). The Baha'i issue, however, afforded easy victories that could be rallied around and used to distract from stagnation or reversals in other areas.

⁸⁶ Choubine, *Dr. Mohammad Mosaddeq va Baha'ian*, p. 44.

⁸⁷ As previously mentioned, an internal Baha'i census showed that about a million Iranians had been attending Baha'i gatherings at the religion's peak. This threat of Baha'i proselytization was very personal for some of the leading proponents of anti-Baha'i action. Mahmud Halabi (the leader of the anti-Baha'i Hojjatiyeh Society) was inspired to “inoculate” Muslim youth against Baha'i arguments and Baha'i literature after his good friend and fellow seminarian became a Baha'i (see Chapter VIII). Ayatollah Khomeini was also influenced when his friend and fellow cleric Abdu'l-Hamid Ishraq-Khavari converted to the Baha'i Faith and became one of the most important Baha'i scholars of the Pahlavi period, rivaled only by Fadil Mazandarani (who was also a Shi'ite cleric before becoming a Baha'i).

At the end of the last chapter, I introduced the idea that anti-Baha'ism was used as a counter-melody to the articulation of national Shi'ism, meaning that it was intrinsically connected and, although in a subordinate role, it played the important role of filling the gaps and hiding the deficiencies of the main argument, which was incomplete. This chapter has shown how anti-Baha'ism compensated for the limited reach and divided aspirations of the Islamic movement by providing it with a powerful unifying issue that could not only consolidate the diverse Islamic factions, but also frame the Islamic movement as a populist struggle that could appeal to less devout Iranians.

This emergence of anti-Baha'ism as a national struggle was an important proto-nationalist development. As van der Veer notes, one of the main features of nationalist discourses is the idea that “the nation is never entirely secure,” since it constantly faces the threat of other forms of nationalism as well as betrayal from within by national apostates.⁸⁸ In this period, Communism was treated as a competing national ideology, while the Baha'is were cast as Iran's national apostates. Not only were the Baha'is cast as the “enemy within,” but it was in the struggle against them that the first “martyrs” of the “Muslim nation” were discursively created in connection with the Abarqu murders. It has been said that every creation myth needs its devil,⁸⁹ and, for the early Islamic movement in Iran, the Baha'is were cast in this role.

⁸⁸ van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism*, p. 193.

⁸⁹ After reading an early version of Aaron Sorkin's script for *The Social Network* (DVD, directed by David Fincher, 2010; Los Angeles: Columbia Pictures, 2011), a Facebook representative dismissed it by saying, “every creation myth needs its devil.” Sorkin incorporated this line into his final script.

CHAPTER IV

The Anti-Baha'i Pogrom of 1955 as Object Lesson

Introduction

In 1955, during the month of Ramadan (April 24– May 22), the Iranian government joined with the ulama and several Islamic organizations in a national pogrom against the Baha'i minority.¹ As discussed in Chapter I, in the existing literature this pogrom has generally been ignored or treated as an early clerical victory on the road to Revolution.² This chapter treats the pogrom, and particularly its culmination in the destruction of the dome of the National Baha'i Center, as object lesson. That is to say, I argue that it was the tangible demonstration of an idea that was designed to be instructive, meant to convey authority, and intended to serve as a deterrent to further deviation. The idea that was embodied in this destructive episode was the belief that Shi'ism was the basis of Iranian nationhood. The growing influence and size of the Baha'i minority, and its increasingly bold entry into the public sphere, were perceived as fundamental threats to the Shi'ite nature of the state, which needed to be actively opposed. The pogrom was essentially a marking of territory, writ large, a demonstration of power meant to

¹ There were related episodes of violence that continued into the summer and these are typically included as part of this pogrom. I treat these later episodes separately (in the following chapter), as part of the power struggles that emerged following the collapse of the pogrom.

² The pogrom is also invoked by Baha'is and others as evidence that Baha'is were persecuted by the Iranian government during the Pahlavi period and were not the favored partisans of the Court that they were portrayed as in anti-Baha'i polemic.

intimidate and scare away a perceived rival. Although ultimately unsuccessful as a pogrom, failing to achieve any of its enumerated goals, I argue that the pogrom succeeded as object lesson, a point that is further developed in subsequent chapters.

“To rule, not reign”

As discussed in the previous chapter, Ayatollah Borujerdi spent many years trying in vain to convince the government to take systematic action against the Baha'is. In 1955, he was finally successful in winning governmental approval due to the synchronicity of Mohammad Reza Shah's first attempt at direct rule and the first real period of political calm since 1941. By 1955, the political uncertainty following the 1953 coup to remove Mosaddeq was fading and Tudeh (Iran's major communist party) had been decimated through an intense two-year campaign aimed at eradicating it as a viable force in Iran.³ With the Left forced underground and the Right firmly in the royalist camp, the Shah felt profoundly confident (except for his ongoing anxiety over the lack of an heir). His confidence was demonstrated by his replacement of the American-chosen Prime Minister, General Zahedi, with Hossein Ala, who was recognized as “the Shah's instrument.”⁴ This replacement was widely and correctly understood as an indication of the Shah intention “to ‘rule’ rather than ‘reign.’”⁵ Later American diplomatic assessments identified 1955 as the beginning of the Shah's dictatorship.⁶

The hesitant and undecided Shah, discussed in Chapter II, had been emboldened by the “popular” movement that removed Mosaddeq. He reportedly believed that the

³ DDEPL, WH Office, NSC Staff, Papers 1948-61, Disaster File Series, Box 65, Folder – Iran (1) NSC, Progress Report on “United States Policy towards Iran,” October 13, 1954.

⁴ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 114808 / EP 1015 / 4, Stevens to FO, October 6, 1955.

⁵ DDEPL, WH Office, NSC Staff, Papers 1948-61, Disaster File Series, Box 66, Folder (7), Progress Report on “United States Policy towards Iran,” July 6, 1955.

⁶ See, for example, NACPM, RG 59 / 250 / 63 / 18 / 6, Box 3, Folder 20: Task Force on Iran, draft recommendation, May 10, 1961.

American-funded crowds on the street during the coup had actually been genuine in their expressions of affection and in their desire for his return. He wept at the people's supposed displays of love for him and exclaimed, "Can it be true? I knew it. I knew it. They love me."⁷ At the very least, he saw the coup as a British and American vote of confidence in him, which put to rest, at least temporarily, his abiding anxiety about suffering the same fate as his father. American reports relate that, after the coup, the Shah

seems to be living in a dream world. He appears have the idea that he was brought back into power entirely by the love of his people for him personally, and to resent any suggestion that his return was due to the efforts of any particular military or civilian groups.⁸

In a later interview, the Shah said that the fall of Arab monarchies did not disturb him, since he considered the removal of Mosaddeq in 1953 to have been a popular revolution of the people and "a form of election" that confirmed his position as king. "I was ready to die for my people," he claimed, "but the uprising demonstrated that my people were also ready to die for me."⁹

Despite this new confidence, there was the ongoing irritant of the lack of an heir. The Shah's first marriage produced a daughter, but his second marriage had not resulted in any children. To make matters worse, Ali Reza, his half-brother and the crown prince, had died in a plane crash in October 1954. When it came to securing the dynasty that his father had started, producing an heir was seen as a necessary concomitant to seizing more direct control of the affairs of state. For this reason, the Shah and Queen Soraya traveled across Europe and the United States from late 1954 until early 1955. The Shah wished to

⁷ *Newsweek*, August 31, 1953, pp. 30-1.

⁸ USDS, *Iran, 1950-1954*, Reel 12: 876.

⁹ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 133007 / EP 1015 / 62, Tehran to FO, December 2, 1958.

test the likely American reaction to his planned assumption of more direct control over Iran, to secure additional financial and military aid to facilitate this ambition, and to have the best available fertility experts examine his wife and himself to determine why they were not able to conceive. The tests revealed that the couple should be able to produce children, leading to confidence in the likely arrival of a male heir.¹⁰ The Shah, who had a limited role in politics up to this point, now decided that the time had come for him to “rule not reign,” a development that marked the “keynote” development of that year.¹¹ The replacement of Zahedi was the beginning of what was to become a revolving door of Iranian Prime Ministers, none of whom were allowed to develop into a “strong man” alternative to the Shah.

With the Shah’s personal assumption of power, the breaking of Tudeh, and the replacement of a Prime-Minister beholden to the West with one beholden to the Crown, the Shah could no longer find excuses to postpone or otherwise evade the debt that he owed the ulama for the key role that they played in removing Mosaddeq and returning royal rule in 1953. It was, therefore, not a complete surprise when Borujerdi’s representative, Mohammad Taqi Falsafi, came to collect this boon, which the Shah had been able to evade in previous years.

Falsafi had long been used by Borujerdi as his chosen lobbyist on the Baha’i issue, as discussed in the previous chapter. He was utilized because he had allegiances beyond the traditional clergy, was on good terms with powerful politicians, and “reportedly enjoys the favor of the Shah.”¹² He had endeared himself to the Crown so

¹⁰ Ibid., FO 371 / 114808 / EP1015 / 2, Stevens to FO, April 4, 1955.

¹¹ Ibid., FO 371 / 120710 / EP 1011 / 1, Stevens to FO, January 1, 1956.

¹² USDS, *Iraq, 1955-1959*, Reel 15: 140.

much that, in the years following the 1953 coup restoring the Shah, Falsafi had been chosen to deliver sermons on state radio throughout the holy month of Ramadan.

The request for royal tribute was, moreover, made when the new, sickly Prime Minister was out of the country for many months receiving medical care, thus preventing the Shah from shunting any requests to Ala. The vacuum created by the removal of Zahedi and the absence of the seasoned Ala provided a tempting opening to be exploited, as the Shah and his chief advisor (Alam) were eager but green, and the Cabinet divided. In the British assessment, “the disappearance of a strong PM and the absence of a weak one” explained the regime’s susceptibility to intrigues and inability to recover quickly from them.¹³

The conclusion of oil negotiations also further hampered the Shah’s ability to impede calls for anti-Baha’i action. The British Ambassador at the time reported that “efforts were made last year [1954] to start some move against [Baha’is], but the Government counseled delay while the oil negotiations were in progress.”¹⁴ This is also confirmed by Falsafi in a May 10, 1955 interview in *Etehad-e Melli* in which he describes a meeting earlier in the year with Borujerdi in which the Grand Ayatollah was deeply distressed over the Baha’i matter and insisted that, since the oil negotiations were now over and the Tudeh threat removed, it was the right time to rise up and demand action against the Baha’is.¹⁵

Shortly before the beginning of Ramadan 1334 [April 1955], Falsafi sought permission from Borujerdi to speak out against the Baha’is during his popular Ramadan

¹³ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 120710 / EP 1011 / 1, Stevens to FO, January 1, 1956.

¹⁴ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 1 / 55, Stevens to FO May 12, 1955.

¹⁵ *Etehad-e Melli*, 19 Ordibehesht 1334 [May 10, 1955].

sermons at Masjed-e Shah [The Shah's Mosque], which were broadcast on state radio. After considering Falsafi's proposal, Borujerdi felt that this would be a dangerous gambit that could be used as a pretext for obstructing the larger campaign against the Baha'is. To guard against this possibility, he instructed Falsafi to first obtain the permission of the Shah. If this could be obtained, he approved of Falsafi's plan to take the case against the Baha'is and present it directly to the national audience, expressing hope that although the appeals to the leadership of Iran had failed, "at least the Baha'is will be hammered in public opinion (*afkar-e 'omumi*)."¹⁶

Armed with Borujerdi's approval, Falsafi met with the Shah several days before the beginning of Ramadan. In his version of the meeting, Falsafi informed the Shah that Borujerdi had expressed approval for him to use his national broadcasts during the holy month to address the Baha'i controversy, which "had become the cause of anxiety to Muslims." In this version the Shah thought briefly before telling Falsafi to "go ahead and speak."¹⁷

At this time, Borujerdi and Falsafi took the Shah's approval at face value. In later clerical treatments of these events, however, the Shah is portrayed as insincere from the start. Davani, the biographer of both Falsafi and Borujerdi, constantly annotates any references to the Shah's partnership and support for the pogrom with notes that argue that this support was always insincere and duplicitous. He claims that both Pahlavi shahs were supporters of the Baha'is and that the apparent anti-Baha'i moves in 1955 were only "surface-level" and were merely a distraction to satisfy the frenzy (*shur*) or the people

¹⁶ Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi*, p. 200.

¹⁷ Ibid.

against the Baha'is, which could not be ignored, but that after this public outcry faded the state grew even closer to the Baha'is than it had been before the pogrom.¹⁸

Despite these later reappraisals, Falsafi and Borujerdi both acted as if they fully accepted that the Shah had agreed to national efforts against the Baha'is. Falsafi notes that, following the meeting with the Shah, he gathered together a number of clerics, briefed them on the plans for Ramadan, and told them to spread the instructions nationally. A multi-layered campaign was devised in which what was broadcast on the radio would be re-enforced in the mosques and in the public squares, such that "Conversation everywhere was centered on the necessity of repressing (*sarkubi*) the Baha'is, who were clients (*vabasteh*) of Zionism and America."¹⁹

Falsafi's version of the Shah's agreement to the pogrom has obvious problems. In Vahman's view, the Shah's hasty, closed-door approval of the pogrom, only two days before it was to begin (and without even consulting with Alam) is in itself an indication that Falsafi had coerced the Shah into agreeing.²⁰ The Shah had obfuscated on the Baha'i issue for a decade, and was famous for his indecisiveness, so it is highly unlikely that he would immediately agree to such a pogrom unless he felt forced into a corner. The details of this coercion emerge in the British diplomatic records from this period. The British Ambassador relates his initial belief that

the present move on the part of the Moslem leaders has been brought about by strained relations between the Shah and Ayatollah Burujerdi, the Supreme Shia divine in Qum. The latter, whether genuinely or as a means of increasing the influence of the mullahs, claims to be dissatisfied by the Shah's attitude towards religion and shocked by the gay social life at Court and during the Shah's visit abroad. It is believed that he may have prompted Falsafi to suggest when he saw

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 200 n1.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 201.

²⁰ Vahman, *160 Sal Mobarezeh ba A'in-e Baha'i*, p. 241.

the Shah on April 22 (2 days before Ramadan) that he should preach a series of sermons against communism and also attack the Baha'is.²¹

The reference to objectionable activities abroad concerned the aforementioned visit to the West by the Shah and Queen Soraya from late 1954 until early 1955. They made a vacation out of the trip and engaged in rather risqué behavior that was, unfortunately for them, captured by the press. Reports had been coming back to Iran of the new Shah's open drinking, gambling, and decadence (he brought a fleet of luxury vehicles with him). These reports were of limited consequence, but what caused serious problems were photographs of Queen Soraya in a barely-there swimsuit in Miami. Borujerdi and Falsafi came to possess some of these photographs and used them to blackmail the Shah into agreeing to the anti-Baha'i pogrom that Borujerdi had been lobbying for since the late 1940s.²²

According to Denis Wright, of the British Embassy, it was the Shah's media officer (Hamzavi) who first revealed that the paparazzi were to blame for the pogrom:

Hamzavi then came to the point which he said was the reason for his insistence on seeing me today; it was that he had learned from Dr. Eqbal that the Shah had admitted that he had agreed to Falsafi's preaching against the Baha'is as the price, at Falsafi's suggestion, of buying off Burujerdi's displeasure with the behavior of the Queen in America, particularly her appearing publically and being photographed in a scanty bathing costume. Hamzavi modestly said that these photographs had been taken during the two weeks that he was not with the royal family in America; if he had been there it never would have happened. This news of the Shah's sole responsibility for the anti-Baha'i business should be conveyed immediately to the Americans so as to finally explode their suspicions that we were behind the troubles.²³

Decades later, when Denis Wright discussed the occasion for the Iranian Oral History Project, he shared a similar recollection of the event, but added that Alam had

²¹ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 1 / 55, Stevens to FO, May 12, 1955.

²² See Chapter III.

²³ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 29 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Wright, June 15 1955.

personally shown him one of the offending pictures.²⁴ He also added an additional element to the blackmail threat, saying that the Shah's supposed affair and illegitimate son with Mrs. Cabot-Lodge was also to be exposed and used against him, since he was unable to produce a legitimate heir. This version of events is also related in Wright's unpublished memoirs, which discuss how Alam showed him two American weeklies, one of which discussed the illegitimate son, while the other featured a photo of the queen in the "scantiest of bathing costumes."²⁵

The British Ambassador, Roger Stevens believed that the Shah agreed to the clerical call for action because he "thought it inadvisable to resist the proposal for attacks on the Bahais in view of his general relations with Ayatollah Burujerdi."²⁶ Giving in on this one issue, which he saw as inconsequential, would settle his debt with the ulama and assure their support as he consolidated power. Moreover, the victims of the pogrom would be from an apolitical community from which he had no cause to fear reprisals, and—he imagined—no one outside of Iran would care about Iran's internal communal conflicts as long as Christians and Jews were not targeted.

The theory that the pogrom was primarily the result of the Shah's desire to maintain good relations with Borujerdi is also supported by Tehran's *imam jom'eh*:

When the Shah went to Qum during the [Persian New Year celebrations at the end of March], Ayatollah Burujerdi made a point of being out of town on that particular day. Burujerdi no doubt put Falsafi up to the [Baha'i] game the latter

²⁴ Denis Wright, Interview recorded by Habib Ladjevardi, 10, 11 October 1984, Aylesbury, England. Iranian Oral History Collection, Harvard University. <http://pds.lib.harvard.edu/pds/view/2906583?n=1&s=4&printThumbnails=no> (accessed February 20, 2011).

²⁵ Denis Wright, "The Memoirs of Sir Denis Wright (1911-1976)," 2 volumes (unpublished memoirs), vol. 1., p. 280.

²⁶ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 1 / 55, Stevens to FO, May 12, 1955.

has been playing... The Shah must have realized the significance of this [pogrom] but, in view of his relations with Qum, thought it best to let it go.²⁷

Although the government would later blame the clergy for the events of the pogrom, feign ignorance, and deny all culpability, Asadollah Alam (the Interior Minister and the Shah's chief advisor and friend) admitted to the British embassy that these claims were false and said that "the anti-Baha'i agitation had been entirely the Government's and the Shah's fault. Falsafi had said beforehand that he proposed to talk against Communism and against the Baha'is and he had been allowed to go ahead." He further admitted that it was the Shah who was personally at fault since he made the decision to support Borujerdi's call for action without consultation and on his own authority, since he "wanted to keep in with the mullahs" and "thought Borujerdi was upset with him."

In Alam's opinion, the Shah was a fool to take Falsafi's "fabricated" version of Borujerdi's instructions at face value, since he "was a blackmailer and he had been caught out at least once claiming to speak for Borujerdi when he had no justification for doing so."²⁸ Many years later, Alam repeats this assessment of Falsafi.²⁹ In his opinion, it was Falsafi, not Borujerdi, who forced the pogrom and deluded (*eghfal kardan*) those in power in order to achieve a national battle against the Bahais.³⁰ In his later comments about 1955, Alam claims that the elderly Borujerdi "seemed to have become like someone who had become addle-brained but who was not permitted to let this condition become public."³¹ This claim is not supported, however, and all documents that I have seen from the years in question suggest that Borujerdi was lucid and functioning well at the time.

²⁷ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 1 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Fearnley, May 11, 1955.

²⁸ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 18 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Fearnley, May 24, 1955.

²⁹ Asadollah Alam, *Guftoguha-ye Man ba Shah* (Tehran: Tarh Naw Publications, 1992) part one, pp. 66-67.

³⁰ Afnan, *Bigunahan*, pp. 260-61.

³¹ Alam, *Goftoguha-ye Man ba Shah*, part one, pp. 66-67.

He was, however, very reliant on his agents and never showed any inclination to question his sources, or to interact directly with the government, and this gave his agents a high level of autonomy, which could have been exploited to a limited degree. Whether or not Falsafi initially misrepresented Borujerdi, it is clear that the Grand Ayatollah was fully supportive of action against the Baha'is and was fully behind Falsafi once royal permission had been granted.

The eleventh hour parlay for a pogrom led to a campaign that caught the Baha'is completely by surprise, since the Shah had shown no indication that he would turn against them. On *Naw-Ruz* (March 21, 1955), just over a month before the pogrom began, the Baha'i community was optimistic about expansion in Iran, announcing that twelve million *tomans* were being raised for the construction of a lavish Baha'i Temple in Iran, designed by Mason Remey, and featuring a huge golden dome. This was to be the first Baha'i temple to be constructed in Iran.³² None were planned previously because conditions in Iran were never considered stable enough or safe enough for such a project to be attempted. The 1955 temple plans show that the Baha'is did not have any indication that a pogrom was imminent, but rather saw themselves entering a period of relative calm and safety.

The “anger of the people”

Ramadan sermons had been broadcast on state radio since 1948 and in 1953 and 1954 Falsafi had been chosen to give these sermons with the understanding that he would use the national platform to speak out against Communism. He began his 1955 sermons with a similar emphasis in the first few days of the month before he shifted his attacks to the

³² *Baha'i News*, May 1955, p2.

Baha'is.³³ This delay served two purposes. It provided time for the national organization of a pogrom that was only approved days before the beginning of the month, and it also allowed him to create the impression that anti-Baha'i action was a continuation of the anti-Communist actions of the previous years, both thematically (Baha'is and Communists were both similarly marked as foreign, treasonous, and irreligious) and in terms of state approval for both efforts.

Falsafi's official Ramadan broadcasts provided the tent pole for a nationwide series of efforts against the Baha'is, which were led by the ulama as well as the Islamic associations discussed in the previous two chapters. The broadcasts were mostly heard through radios in the bazaars and other places of business and were aired between one and two in the afternoon. Falsafi's sermons were popular, even before the pogrom, because he was an engaging speaker who was considered the most skilled orator of his generation. Unlike Borujerdi's preference for seclusion and erudition, Falsafi was at home working a crowd. According to Fischer, young religious enthusiasts knew Falsafi "the same way they know movie actors."³⁴

His sermons involved vicious attacks against the Baha'is in order to "stoke the flame of the fire of hatred and the anger of the people." Falsafi did not attack the Baha'is as apostates from Islam, but as national apostates, traitors to the homeland. He repeated the charge, popularized by the Fedaiyan-e Islam, that Baha'is were "nationlessness" (*bivatani*). To prove this, he quoted the command in Baha'i scriptures to "Glory

³³ Tavakoli-Targhi, "Anti-Bahatism," p. 218.

³⁴ Fischer, *Iran*, p. 100.

not in love for your country.” He did not quote the rest of the sentence, which adds the qualifier: “but rather [glory] in love for all mankind”³⁵

Falsafi claimed that the Baha’is were an even greater threat than Tudeh (Iran’s Communist party) and that there were a million Baha’is in Iran, all of whom he denounced as not only “enemies of Islam”³⁶ but also as “traitors” and “agents of a foreign power.”³⁷ Baha’is were “accused of wishing and plotting for the overthrow of the constituted government of Iran and are pictured not as Iranian citizens... but as members of a diabolical conspiracy which threatens the very security of Iran.”³⁸ He claimed that even atheism would be preferable to Baha’ism, which he believed emitted an evil influence, and whose followers “had become increasingly powerful in Iran” and “have been planning to set up a Baha’i regime in the spring of 1956.”³⁹ This last charge seems to be a paranoid reading of plans for a Baha’i House of Worship in Iran as part of their global “Ten Year Crusade,” which catalyzed the anxious agitation discussed in the previous chapter. The accusation that Baha’is were paid foreign agents is, of course, particularly ironic given Falsafi’s role as a paid agent of the CIA during the coup and through programs such as BEDAMN.⁴⁰

Later in Ramadan, Falsafi claimed that, since their own party was prohibited, Tudeh members were now integrating themselves into Baha’ism in the hope of joining the Baha’is in a coup to take over Iran in 1956. This claim of Tudeh co-operation was, in part, aimed at calming American objections to the pogrom by framing it as an anti-Communist endeavor. In response to international opposition to the pogrom, particularly

³⁵ Afnan, *Bigunahan*, p. 256.

³⁶ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 326.

³⁷ CIA, *Current Intelligence Weekly Summary*: 26 May 1955, p. 4.

³⁸ USDS, *Iraq, 1955-1959*, Reel 15: 140.

³⁹ *Ibid*, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 326.

⁴⁰ Gasiorowski, *U.S. Foreign Policy and the Shah*, p. 70.

American opposition, Falsafi argued that he was not engaging in religious persecution, but was instead targeting a subversive political organization, just as he had done against Tudeh with American approval. By equating the Baha'is with Tudeh, and even claiming that Tudeh and the Baha'is were merging, Falsafi was appealing to America's Cold War sensibilities and support for anti-Communist efforts.⁴¹ This attempt at spin was never taken seriously by American officials.

A major element of Falsafi's call to excise Baha'ism involved the demand for the removal of Baha'is from important and influential positions. Although this call was framed negatively, in terms of the removal of Baha'is, it also involved the positive assertion that those who controlled Iran must come from, and concern themselves with, the needs of the "Islamic nation." This deeper message was conveyed using the example of the Shah's personal physician, who was a known Baha'i. This individual was used as an example of Baha'is usurping the place of Muslims. In one of his broadcasts, Falsafi insists that the Shah must replace Dr. Ayadi since "our country has so many Muslim doctors and the people are upset that a Baha'i individual is the personal physician of the Shah."⁴²

According to Davani, as a result of Falsafi's call for action the nation "raged with one voice," protested against Baha'ism and "sought to achieve the extermination of the

⁴¹ Tavakoli-Targhi, "Anti-Bahaism," pp. 215, 218-9. Bayne notes that although the alleged Tudeh-Baha'i alliance was a fabrication, the two organizations were not that different in many respects. They were both primarily focused on recruiting new members, had a well-organized national network, were legally proscribed, employed an extensive network through which mail was delivered by hand to avoid interception, smuggled literature in from abroad, and engaged in local activities that were largely directed from overseas. Despite its highly-organized party structure, however, the Baha'i Faith was a religious organization and, as such, was staged in such a way that it could attract the progressive middle class who were religious but were disconnected from traditional Shi'ism and unwilling to embrace the irreligion of the Left. Whereas Islam was thought to be embraced by the poor and abandoned in degrees upon entry into the modern middle class, Baha'ism was seen as the opposite, gaining relevance the further one moved into the modern middle class (Bayne, "Baha'is Again," pp. 6-7, 10).

⁴² Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi*, p. 194.

roots and traces of the Baha'is from the country.” He claims that Falsafi did not create these feelings, but merely channeled and legitimized the “profound and immense disgust and loathing” that the people already felt towards the Baha'is. He traces these feelings to the Baha'is' supposed use of their important and influential positions to act in a “Zionist-like” fashion against the Muslims in different locations in Iran, leading to their desire for justice.⁴³

The terror campaign affected hundreds of cities, towns and villages and victimized hundreds of thousands of people. In rural areas Baha'i farmers saw their crops destroyed, irrigation water diverted, and animals mutilated.⁴⁴ In small villages, Baha'i businesses were boycotted, stores would refuse to sell food to Baha'is, and they would sometimes be forced to choose between starvation and emigration.⁴⁵ Many Baha'i centers and holy places were damaged, desecrated, vandalized, and burned, with the most valuable properties seized and looted by government forces. Throughout the country, many Baha'i private homes and businesses were also looted, vandalized, and burned.⁴⁶ Cemeteries were desecrated and corpses mutilated.⁴⁷ Some Baha'i children were expelled from school. Baha'is faced constant torment on the street and taunting about their imminent “holocaust.” Some Baha'i women were kidnapped and forced to marry Muslims.⁴⁸ Other Baha'i women and girls were raped or gang-raped, sometimes as punishment if their family did not convert.⁴⁹ One fifteen-year-old girl was stripped

⁴³ Ibid., p 203 n1.

⁴⁴ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 365.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 366.

⁴⁶ U.H.J., *The Baha'i World, Volume XIII*, p. 292.

⁴⁷ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 327.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 366.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 327,365-66, 391.

naked, beaten and gang-raped in public.⁵⁰ Physical assaults “have been frequent”⁵¹ and there were instances of stoning.⁵² The security forces ignored, encouraged or joined in all of this. When Baha’is requested protection from the government, officers would typically show up and demand money in exchange for protection, but would usually not actually provide protection, even after their monetary demands were met.⁵³ As a result of this intense atmosphere of terror, papers like *Dad* carried letters from individuals in which they denied a Baha’i identity and claimed to be Muslim, in the hope of escaping persecution.⁵⁴

In addition to these attacks, there were threats of a “general massacre”⁵⁵ later that year during the holy month of Moharram (which contains Shi’ism’s central ritual commemorations during Ashura, and which is a period often characterized by heightened religiosity). Unlike the threatened massacres in Moharram, the Ramadan campaign seemed primarily concerned with putting the Baha’is “in their place” by removing their material wealth, humiliating and terrorizing them, removing them from positions of prominence, and scaring them into “returning” to Islam. Murder does not seem to have been the primary intent of this campaign, although some murders certainly occurred and, of course, many died nationwide as a result of injuries received during beatings.⁵⁶

Violence was also limited because of Falsafi’s insistence (under pressure from the government, which was itself under Anglo-American pressure) that order be maintained.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 366.

⁵¹ Ibid., 367.

⁵² TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 22 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Wiggin, May 19, 1955.

⁵³ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 343.

⁵⁴ Tavakoli-Targhi, “Anti-Bahaism,” p. 217.

⁵⁵ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 379; UHJ, *The Baha’i World, Volume XIII*, p. 789.

⁵⁶ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 365.

Due to these restrictions, those leading the pogrom did not aim to kill but rather to injure (*aziyyat*), torment (*azar*), and loot (*gharat*) the Bahais.⁵⁷

In the violence that did occur, Baha'i sources relate recurrent patterns in which the abuse and harassment of the "terrorists" (*kharab karan*) escalated until the "cruel tyrant's claw" came down on the innocents, not killing but coming close, by slicing heads, stabbing, or committing atrocities so "savage" (*vahshianeh*) that "the pen is ashamed from describing it."⁵⁸ The height of the attacks were generally accompanied by looting, arson, or desecration, and the incidents typically involved unanswered appeals to governmental authorities, who quite often mocked or extorted the victims, and sometimes actively took part in their persecution. Fatalities were rare and were generally among those who were too ill or too old to withstand the physical and psychological stresses of the attacks. Full details of specific acts of violence are given in Baha'i martyr narratives and have not been related in this study except in cases where they provide necessary context or are discussed for a larger analytical purpose.⁵⁹

In support of the clergy, the acting Prime Minister (Entezam) spoke publicly against the Baha'is, referring to them as a politicized "mised group." He dropped this façade in private discussions, however, as did Prime Minister Ala. Off the record, both admitted that the clerical polemic that the government was repeating "was nonsense."⁶⁰ Although they did not accept Falsafi's polemic against the Baha'is, the mostly secular Cabinet felt no sympathy for them. Even Alam, who fiercely opposed the pogrom, did not do so because of any sympathy for the Baha'is, but rather out of a deep anti-clerical

⁵⁷ Afnan, *Bigunahan*, p. 260.

⁵⁸ See, for example, Afnan, *Bigunahan*, pp. 260-64.

⁵⁹ For detailed persecution narratives, see Afnan's *Bigunahan* and Vahman's *160 Sal Mobarezeh ba A'in-e Baha'i*.

⁶⁰ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1556 / 1014 / 131 / 55, "Account of interview with Prime Minister Ala," August 2, 1955.

sentiment. According to Fearnley (of the British Embassy), Alam “showed no qualms about the way the Baha’is had been treated. Nor did he seem particularly worried about the effects of the Gov.’s action on opinion abroad.” Instead, his efforts against Falsafi were primarily motivated by personal animosity.⁶¹

When British and American pressure to stop the anti-Baha’i pogrom began to be applied, Alam took the lead in attempting to reign in Falsafi. He was politically naïve, however, and was repeatedly bested by Falsafi. In an early encounter, Alam pointed out that there was no need for Falsafi’s political agitation, as the Baha’is already lacked constitutional recognition and “could be proceeded against under existing laws.” Sensing an opportunity, “Falsafi asked if he could quote Mr. Alam on this, and the latter, foolishly... agreed that he could.”⁶² Alam’s off-the-cuff remark to Falsafi that no new anti-Baha’i legislation was needed was publicized by Falsafi as a promise by the government to dismiss the Baha’is.⁶³

The seizure of Baha’i centers

The National Baha’i Center and other large Baha’i centers across Iran were occupied on May 7 following a series of dramatic street protests by anti-Baha’i mobs that culminated in the seizure of the Baha’i National Center.⁶⁴ Within Iran, the government pretended that these seizures were an expression of common cause with the anti-Baha’i mobs, while internationally, and in private conversations, they were framed as protective moves aimed at safeguarding Baha’i properties from mob action. The latter description was accurate,

⁶¹ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 18 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Fearnley, May 24, 1955.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ The legislative aspects of the anti-Baha’i campaign are discussed in the following chapter.

⁶⁴ Tavakoli-Targhi, “Anti-Bahatism,” p. 216.

and the occupation of Baha'i properties occurred in response to the increasing pressure by Iran's foreign patrons to prevent disruptive anti-Baha'i violence.

The protective nature of the military occupations was not initially suspected by the anti-Baha'i forces. Falsafi claimed that the seizures took place in response to the "public frenzy" (*hayajan*) stirred up by the pogrom, which he referred to as "the movement of the people" (*mardom*).⁶⁵ In General Bakhtiar's proclamation announcing this move, he appropriates the rhetoric of the anti-Baha'i movement:

Since the public displays (*tazahorat*) and propaganda of the Baha'i sect have come to be the source of the agitation (*tahrik*) of the public's emotions, for the preservation of discipline and public order, the disciplinary forces have been directed to occupy this sect's propaganda centers, which have been called 'Haziratu'l-Quds,' so that all possible eventualities will be prevented. At this time, the military governor of Tehran also expects from every patriot that, in this matter, they exhibit consideration for discipline and public order, and abstain from all demonstrations and non-sanctioned actions that are disruptive of public order...⁶⁶

This announcement drew crowds who were curious about the situation, and who gathered around the seized property.

After the publication of the news of the occupation of the Haziratu'l-Quds [National Baha'i Center] numerous groups of people set out looking for information about the state of the situation and to see the secret society (*mahfel-e makhfi*) of the Baha'is at the Haziratu'l-Quds. After breaking the fast, sweets were distributed amongst the people.⁶⁷

Although he applauded the action of the government at the time, Falsafi later denounced it as a "feign" and a "show of religiosity." He claimed that this was known at

⁶⁵ Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi*, p. 202.

⁶⁶ *Ettela'at*, 16 Ordibehesht 1334 [May 7, 1955].

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 17 Ordibehesht 1334 [May 8, 1955].

the time and it was for this reason that the Association of Clerics did not thank him.

Davani claims that this occupation was carried out because

The regime, which did not expect such a far-reaching reaction from the people, was compelled by them to feign common cause before it lost control of the situation. It joined the movement and occupied the headquarters of the Baha'is, which had previously been seized by the people.⁶⁸

Davani then contrasts the citizenry's "seizure" of the National Baha'i Center with the military governor's "occupation" of Baha'i properties. He points out that while "the people"⁶⁹ had engaged in *tasarof* (seizure), the government was instead very careful to always refer to what they did as *eshghal* (occupation). At the time, people assumed that these were synonymous, but he later realized the significance of the wording, as seizures imply permanence whereas occupations are temporary. The government, with its word play, was "implicitly admitting that they would eventually return ownership of those centers to the Baha'is" and that this temporary occupation was just to allow them to be "shielded them from the destructive rage (*khashm-e virangar*) of the Muslim people (*mardom*)."⁷⁰

Despite these latter day clerical denunciations of the Shah's deception in this matter, contemporary documents reveal sincere thankfulness and excitement about the government's efforts, which were taken at face value at the time. Shortly after the proclamation by Bakhtiar, Ayatollah Behbahani released a letter of congratulations to the Shah (as Borujerdi's representative), while Borujerdi wrote to congratulate Falsafi for the seizure of Baha'i properties. All clerical communications relating to this event are

⁶⁸ Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi*, p. 203.

⁶⁹ My gloss on the equation of "person" and "Muslim" is provided in Chapter VI.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 203 n1.

explicitly royalist, as the anti-Baha'i movement did not want to oppose the Shah, but rather desired his leadership in their struggle.

In Behbahani's letter on behalf of Borujerdi, he blesses and praises the Shah and thanks him profusely for having "answered the desires of many years' worth of prayers, not only those of this lowly one, but also those of the entire Islamic nation (*mellat-e islami*)." For their closing of "the center of religious and political corruption," Behbahani glorified Bakhtiar's troops as "the army of Islam" (*artesh-e Islam*). He, moreover, announced that an animal would be sacrificed in honor of the Shah, gave his assurance that the Hidden Imam was well-pleased with the Shah, and prayed God to continue to rain "divine confirmations and heavenly favors upon the person of the Shah." The day of the seizures, which was the beginning of the "suppression and extermination" (*qal' va qam'*) of the Baha'is, would "henceforth be known as a holy day amongst the other holy days."⁷¹ In the Shah's reply, he expressed joy and gratitude at Behbahani's praises and claimed that he was "always asking God—the Exalted—for the implementation of the clear and obligatory prescriptions of Islam."⁷²

In his May 7 letter of congratulation to Falsafi, Borujerdi continues the national framing of the Baha'i threat. The occupations of the Baha'is properties are described not in terms of religious dispute or heresy, but as an attempt to safeguard the independence of the nation and the safety of the Shah, the government, and the military from internal sedition. Although excited about the government's efforts, Borujerdi considers this to be only the first stage of a larger battle. He warns that the enemy will not be easily overcome as this "political party" has acted under the guise of religion and, for a century,

⁷¹ *Ettela'at*, 18 Ordibehesht 1334 [May 9, 1955].

⁷² *Ibid.*, 19 Ordibehesht 1334 [May 10, 1955].

has been establishing itself and infiltrating the nation through “disciplined and well-ordered organizations (*tashkilat-e monazzam*), bombastic use of monies from unknown sources, and extensive and blatant propaganda against the official religion of the country, which is naturally the cause of unity.”

As a result of this exaggerated and paranoid vision, Borujerdi insists that actions like those of Falsafi and those who rose up in support of him could only go so far, for only the “enthusiastic action (*jeddiyat*) of the government” could succeed in “gradually exposing the pernicious networks and saving the country from harm.” He claims that the Baha’is are the most dangerous kind of enemy, the one that pretends to be innocent and unarmed. Despite this outward pacifism, he warns that beneath a “thick veil” this “sinister party has infiltrated many positions in the country and the government.”

As proof of their deep roots in the administration, Borujerdi points to the previously discussed Abarqu incident, in which Baha’is and a Muslim thought to be a Baha’i were the scapegoats for the murder of an old woman and her children. Borujerdi claims that on this occasion Baha’is “in a heinous manner used shovels and pickaxes to chop them into pieces” and that it was only through intense pressure by Muslims nationwide that one Baha’i was executed for this crime, but that despite this intense pressure the others were “left alone.”⁷³ The failure to execute more of the Baha’i scapegoats was “proof that this sect has completely infiltrated the governmental bureaucracy.” As such, although the seizure of Baha’i properties was appreciated, it was perhaps ephemeral and, for Borujerdi, “the most important concern is liquidating

⁷³ They were not “left alone.” Some of the Baha’i scapegoats spent a decade in Jail, although they were not executed, and one died in prison.

(*tasviyyeh*) the members of this sect in the government bureaucracy, the Ministries, and sensitive governmental posts.”⁷⁴

In a telegraph to Ayatollah Behbahani regarding his congratulatory telegram to the Shah mentioned above, Ayatollah Borujerdi hails this message to the Shah as an “auspicious” message that “has been the cause of joy.” Repeating his earlier framing of the issue, he again claims that action against the Baha’is was done *for* the Shah. This was because the Baha’i centers supposedly produced propaganda which weakens national unity and “opposes the independence of the country and lays the foundation for the enfeeblement of the institution of the monarchy.” He treats Islam and the monarchy as partners in a symbiotic relationship whose continued well-being was dependent on each other. Borujerdi even describes the co-operation between the state and the clergy in seizing Baha’i property as a “blessed state” (*vojud-e mobarak*), which he prayed would continue into the future.⁷⁵

“An ever-present insult”

Although the government saved Baha’i properties from the mobs, this was done out of its obligations as a client state and not out of concern for the Baha’is. Prime Minister Ala, in particular, had no particular sympathy for the Baha’i victims. In private meetings, he described them as a “disruptive international force” and felt that the very existence of the dome of their National Center was an “ever-present insult”⁷⁶ to Muslims and “an offence

⁷⁴ *Kayhan*, 19 Ordibehesht 1334 [may 10, 1955].

⁷⁵ *Ettela’at*, 19 Ordibehesht 1334 [May 10, 1955].

⁷⁶ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 1: 175.

to the eye of all good Muslims.”⁷⁷ Entezam (the Foreign Minister and Acting Prime Minister during Ala’s absence) echoed this view, and claimed that the National Baha’i Center’s prominent dome was targeted by the anti-Baha’i activists because it was “symbolic of the view in which the Bahais had got too big for their boots in the last few years.”⁷⁸

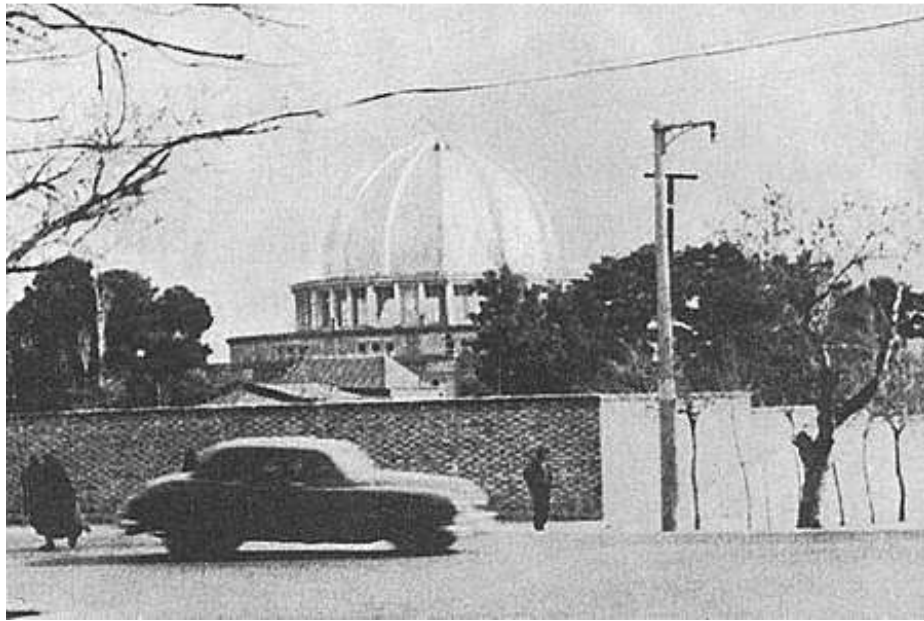


Figure 4. 1. The dome of the National Baha’i Center.

As mentioned above, earlier in the year plans had been announced for the raising of twelve million *tomans* for the start of construction of the first Baha’i temple in Iran. This imposing and prominent structure was to feature a large, golden dome, similar to the famous dome on the Shrine of the Bab on Mt. Carmel.⁷⁹ As Ala and Entezam made clear, even the dome on the existing administrative centre was considered to be

⁷⁷ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1556 / 1014 / 131 / 55, “Account of interview with Prime Minister Ala,” August 2, 1955.

⁷⁸ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 21 / 55, Stevens to FO, May 26, 1955.

⁷⁹ *Baha’i News*, May 1955, p. 2.

ostentatious and an offense, despite its relatively small size. The specter of an imposing, golden-domed addition to the sacred skyline, open to all Iranians, was considered an unbearable affront by the anti-Baha'i agitators. It is in this context that the attack on the small dome of the National Center should be understood. Like so much else during this pogrom, the tangible dome of the Center was (at least for some) a proxy for the phantom dome of the planned Temple. This is one of the reasons why so many of the less-informed sources from this period repeatedly make the mistake of referring to the dome of the Center as the dome of the Temple.

During the government's protective occupation of Baha'i properties, Baha'is were prevented from entering their centers across Iran. Only the caretaker of the Baha'i National Center, Hassan Rezai, was initially allowed to enter.⁸⁰ Eventually, however, he was also removed.⁸¹ According to his daughter, Rezai received physical and psychological assaults during the occupation.⁸² This treatment of Baha'is by the military occupying their property shows that this occupation was not done out of sympathy for the religion, but out of a desire to prevent disorder and to satisfy international pressure. When, for example, the Shah's Baha'i personal physician, Major General Ayadi went to investigate the condition of the Center—in full uniform—he was arrested by Bakhtiar's troops and thrown in jail for twenty-four hours, despite his high rank. After he was released, he is said to have

torn off his rank insignia and given them with a statement that if his position as a general and a servant of the royal court could not be respected in spite of his

⁸⁰ Afnan, *Bigunahan*, p. 257.

⁸¹ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 2: 83.

⁸² Afnan, *Bigunahan*, pp. 265-66.

personal religious beliefs, then he could not properly wear his insignia and serve his country. The Shah dismissed Ayadi, but the queen brought him back...⁸³

As the international press increased coverage of the persecution of Baha'is in Iran, following the seizure of the Baha'i National Center, this caused a great deal of stress to the image-conscious monarch. In a May 11 British report, the Shah "expressed regret" for the "outburst" against the Baha'is and for "the bad effect it had on public opinion abroad." He wished that anti-Greek riots in Turkey "would now deflect attention from Persia to the Turks," and hinted that he would appreciate it if the British embassy could do something to control the foreign press. In response, Denis Wright told the Shah that it was an "English habit" to champion minorities, and that as such he was "in no position to stifle press criticism."⁸⁴

Like the Shah, Falsafi was very upset by the negative reaction abroad to the suppression of the Baha'is in Iran. He was particularly upset that the suppression of Baha'is was being used as evidence "that there is no liberty (*azadi*) in Iran." From his perspective, the pogrom of the citizens (*mardom*) against the "foreigners" (the Baha'is) was actually a struggle *for* liberty.⁸⁵

Several days after the mob disorders that prompted the military occupation of Baha'i centers—and increased British and American pressure to end the pogrom—the Shah sent General Bakhtiar and Major-General Alevi-Moqaddam to inform Falsafi that

⁸³ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 4: 575-76. In her autobiography, Soraya refers to Ayadi as "my old friend" and "the only person [at Court] I really trusted." When he left office, the Shah considered this permanent, but Soraya's anger and remonstrations convinced him to bring Ayadi back after "the storm has blown over." Without Ayadi, Soraya claimed, "I would be unable to endure the life at the Court" (Esfandiary-Bakhtiari, *Soraya*, pp. 74-75, 101).

⁸⁴ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 52 / 55, Confidential Minutes, September 18, 1955.

⁸⁵ Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi*, p. 201.

the anti-Baha'i pogrom was to end.⁸⁶ The Shah had desired an immediate end to the pogrom, but Falsafi was able to negotiate a limited continuation of the pogrom until the end of Ramadan.⁸⁷

After this visit, Borujerdi and Falsafi knew that the time for anti-Baha'i action was limited, but that although the government was no longer a partner in the struggle, it was also unwilling to publicly reverse itself over the Baha'i matter or to be perceived as their defenders. In order to take advantage of this opening, they skipped several stages of the plans for anti-Baha'i action in order to push immediately for the two most important goals: the Baha'i National Center "must thoroughly be destroyed, to the point that it cannot be again converted back to a holy building for the Baha'is," and legislation must be passed to explicitly name Baha'ism as illegal and to force the expulsion of all Baha'is from the military and the civil service.⁸⁸

In public, additional goals were expressed, perhaps to leave room for negotiation. Borujerdi announced in *Kayhan* that he anticipated the resumption of order, but had several clear goals that must be accomplished with the assistance of the state. These were (1) "the Haziratu'l-Quds (National Baha'i Center) must be destroyed and replaced by a new building," (2) "all of the Baha'is" employed by the governmental and national agencies must be ejected (*tard*), and (3) parliament must "pass legislation calling for all of the Baha'is in the country to be expelled (*kharej shodan*)."⁸⁹

At this time, Falsafi also gave a series of interviews to better explain the rationale of the pogrom. He claimed that the Baha'is had been multiplying in number and that this

⁸⁶ Ibid., pp. 201-02; Further details are provided in the following chapter.

⁸⁷ See Chapter V.

⁸⁸ Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi*, p. 207.

⁸⁹ *Kayhan*, 20 Ordibehesht 1334 [May 11, 1955].

group was the creation and tool of colonial powers and planned to take over Iran in 1335 [1956] if nothing was done to prevent this. He blamed all of the “convulsions of the last few years” (such as the oil crisis, the 1953 coup, and the economic downturn) on the Baha’is.⁹⁰ As a result of the damage that they had supposedly already done, and were poised to do,

His Holiness Ayatollah Borujerdi, Ayatollah Behbahani, and the clerical societies have all of their attention focused on exorcising (*tard*) the Baha’i sect from Iranian society, and are continually in contact with the Court, the government, and both chambers of the majles to call for the complete eradication of all of their traces. This effort, which is prompted by the concern of the public, is done in order that the Muslims will attain to peace of mind thereafter.⁹¹

The destruction of the Haziratu’l-Quds (National Baha’i Center) was considered an especially important aspect of this struggle and Falsafi claimed that the government and clerical delegations had agreed

that the building of the Haziratu’l-Quds must be demolished, since if the building remains, then all of the institutions therein will still function and, under the guise of a “holy place,” the Baha’is will again use it for propaganda... Therefore, it is imperative and obligatory to also erase their traces and vestiges.⁹²

The partial destruction of the National Baha’i Center

On May 22, just before the conclusion of Ramadan, the government approved the destruction of the dome of the Baha’i National Center. This was a face-saving gesture offered to Borujerdi and Falsafi in order to smooth anger at the Shah’s withdrawal of support for anti-Baha’i action. It was also a preventative move, removing the object of

⁹⁰ Ibid., 16, 19, 20 Ordibehesht 1334 [May 7, 10, 11, 1955].

⁹¹ Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi*, p. 206 n1.

⁹² Ibid.

provocation (the golden dome) in order to prevent later incidents. The government needed to give Borujerdi some sort of face-saving “victory” to placate him and prevent the continuation of the pogrom after the end of Ramadan, and the destruction of the Center could accomplish this.

The government felt that the destruction of a building, particularly one that was used for administrative tasks, would not generate much outrage abroad. Moreover, the destruction of a physical structure was a more tangible act than ethereal pronouncements or other alternatives. Destruction could be seen, heard, and captured forever in photographs and ruins. At the same time, the building could not be completely destroyed, since the government was under pressure by the Americans not to concede to any clerical demands and to prevent the destruction of Baha’i properties. In a misguided attempt to act in a way that would satisfy both the anti-Baha’i forces at home and pro-Baha’i opinion abroad, the Shah decided to solve this Gordian knot by slicing through it, destroying only the dome while leaving the rest of the massive structure intact. It was, after all, the golden dome, rather than the brick and mortar of the walls, which was the cause of insult to Muslims. Unlike other Baha’i centers, like the one in Mashhad, which was discrete and closeted away, the National Center’s dome was bold and “out” and could not be ignored.

The destruction of the dome began in the morning of May 22 and was very clearly designed as a photo opportunity. In addition to Falsafi and other clerics, the press was in full force, with photographers busy finding the best angles and vantage points with which to capture the moment. In the early afternoon, Falsafi was joined by General Bakhtiar (the military-governor of Tehran) and Major-General Batmanghelich (the army chief of

staff). The two high ranking officers joined Falsafi on the roof and posed for several pictures. In one of the most famous photographs that resulted from this spectacle, General Batmanghelich is captured swinging a pick axe that a reporter provided as a prop for the photo session. The pick axe was symbolic, with cranes and other heavy machinery from the army's engineering section doing the real destructive work. Since the dome was highly reinforced with iron and concrete, its demolition proved difficult and protracted.⁹³



Figure 4. 2. The destruction of the dome of the National Baha'i Center.

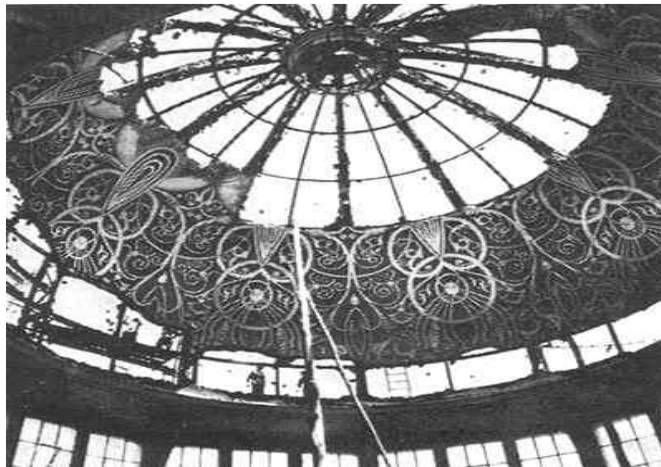


Figure 4. 3. Interior view of damage to the dome of the National Baha'i Center.

⁹³ Afnan, *Bigunahan*, p. 259.

This striking cooperation between the clergy and the military was captured in a series of famous photographs that showed some of the government's most senior military officers working in concert with Falsafi to hack away at the dome of the most important center of the country's largest non-Muslim minority group. This desire for publicity seems to have originated with the military command and was not approved by the Cabinet, providing yet another example of the "extreme lack of coordination in government throughout the campaign."⁹⁴

Batmanghelich was apparently not authorized to take part, but "for some unexplained reason the chief of staff... took it upon himself to wield a pickaxe on the first brick or tile... he did this on his own authority and the shah is very angry about it."⁹⁵ His unauthorized participation may have been motivated by his desire to erase his effeminate reputation. Even two years after the 1953 coup, his "strong character" was still the subject of ridicule after his failure to deliver a *ferman* (order) of appointment from the Shah during the coup, instead running away and crying in his car after encountering pro-Mosaddeq guards.⁹⁶ He did not hate the Baha'is as proxies for America; and was actually himself in the middle of immigration paperwork to move to the United States, where his daughter was already living. He also did not have any particular animosity for the Baha'is themselves and just days before the demolition of the Baha'i headquarters he had been chatting with the British military attaché and had spoken "in deprecating terms about the attack on the Baha'is."⁹⁷ As a result, the photograph

⁹⁴ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 4: 573.

⁹⁵ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 21 / 55, Stevens to FO, May 26, 1955.

⁹⁶ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 11: 105.

⁹⁷ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 20 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Stevens, May 25, 1955.

capturing his smiling attacks caused shock in those who knew him well. It would seem that his involvement was not the result of any religious or even xenophobic sentiment, but was instead a macho act perhaps aimed at reversing his effeminate image. As the photographs show, more than any other participant Chief of Staff Batmanghelich took special pleasure in being photographed in this macho act, smiling widely below what the Americans—behind his back—called his “Hitler moustache.”⁹⁸

According to the Acting Prime Minister (Entezam), “the crazy and unauthorized action of the Chief of Staff in personally taking a hand in knocking down the dome of the Bahai [Center]” was one of the three big errors of incompetence that the government had made over the whole affair (the other two being starting it at all, and not having better oversight over General Bakhtiar). According to him, the Chief of Staff’s participation “was quite inexcusable and the Shah was very angry about it indeed.”⁹⁹ Alam felt likewise, and the “spectacle of cofs [Chief of Staff] Batmangilitch swinging his pick on the Bahai concrete dome brought expressions of disgust.”¹⁰⁰

On the day of the Center’s destruction, Alam sought a meeting with Fearnley (of the British embassy), to discuss the “Baha’i question.” Alam explained the government’s thinking, pointing out that the National Baha’i center was the only Baha’i property with the offending prominent dome and that, although seized, the other Baha’i properties would not be destroyed. Instead the other “public properties” of the Baha’is would be held for awhile and then eventually sold, with “the money going to the Baha’i communities concerned.” This distant compensation, however, was rather dodgy and

⁹⁸ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 11: 105.

⁹⁹ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 20 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Stevens, May 25, 1955.

¹⁰⁰ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 4: 577.

when Fearnley asked for details “Alam became rather obscure, saying that he had no doubt that buyers could be found for them.”¹⁰¹



Figure 4. 4. Falsafi posing with a pickaxe as he takes part in the demolition.



Figure 4. 5. Batmanghelich posing with a pickaxe while Bakhtiar watches.

¹⁰¹ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 18 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Fearnley, May 24, 1955.

A “national” pogrom?

Almost all residents of major towns and cities in Iran were aware of the anti-Baha’i campaign, either through hearing Falsafi’s broadcasts themselves or by receiving information about them indirectly at the bazaar or mosque, through the press, or in other ways. Despite this wide saturation, the response to the pogrom was not homogenous and there was a great deal of variation at the provincial and city level. While in Shiraz the situation degenerated until martial law was imposed, in most areas there was a less robust response, and in others there was little to no interest at all.¹⁰²

Iranian Kurdistan, for example, met Falsafi’s call to action with apathy. This area, which has a relatively large Sunni Muslim population, had been the site of the most intense manifestations of anti-Semitic violence in the years immediately following the creation of Israel, but had little interest in what Sunnis perceived as a Shi’ite issue. Contemporary Kurdish sources confirm that most people in that region simply did not care about the campaign one way or the other, saw it as just another attempt by the central government to loot the helpless, and believed that the most that would occur in the region as a result of the campaign would be some token dismissals of Baha’is.¹⁰³

In Tabriz—the city where the first prophet of the Babi-Baha’i tradition was executed a century before—there was widespread theoretical support for the campaign, but little interest in actually joining it. There were no significant, organized attacks on Baha’is during Ramadan. Rather, the occasion was used as an excuse to engage in political speculation about the “real” origins and motives of the pogrom. Despite nominal participation, the pogrom was generally popular, except for among the well-

¹⁰² See Chapter V.

¹⁰³ NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 20 / 03-06 / Box 8 / Folder 350 – Kurdistan, Memo of Conversation with Dr. Friedrichs, September 24, 1955.

educated, who mostly disapproved of both the pogrom and the clerics behind it, albeit without having any sympathy for the victims.¹⁰⁴ The regional government remained silent on the whole affair, exercising caution and restraint. When orders came from Tehran informing the provincial leadership that the government had changed its mind and was now opposing anti-Baha'i action, the provincial government ordered clerics to comply with the new directives and abstain from all inflammatory actions. Tabriz's chief of police was determined to prevent disorders and all but a few clerics complied with the local authorities. On May 29, however, two Tabrizi clerics were arrested and sent to Khorramabad for condemning the government's inaction on the Baha'i front. In a nearby town, a local mullah called for all Baha'is to be expelled from his city, only to be told to cease this behavior, or he would find himself exiled. Although exceptions like these occurred, they either failed to find traction, or were effectively intercepted by the security forces.¹⁰⁵

In Tehran, reaction was mixed, although it was felt that "No event in the past year has stirred up public opinion so much as the Bahai controversy." Large crowds gathered in the bazaar and at other popular centers to listen together to Falsafi's radio broadcasts, and crowds also took to the streets to seize the National Baha'i Center, and to observe the later military occupation of this Center. As was typical for Tehran, attitudes were split between the affluent north and the poorer, more traditional southern areas.¹⁰⁶ The economic disparity between these two parts of the capital was particularly heightened in the years leading up to 1955, as the population of the city had increased 150% in the decade since the end of World War II, with 85% of the city's inhabitants lacking regular

¹⁰⁴ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 309.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, Reel 1: 15.

¹⁰⁶ NACPM, RG 84 /350/61/20/03-06 / Box 7 / Folder 350, Foreign Service Dispatch 575, June 24, 1955.

employment and most families surviving on less than \$75 a year.¹⁰⁷ In the South, there was strong support for the pogrom due to the traditionalism of the more recently urbanized and the deference many extended to the decisions and leadership of the clerics and Islamic associations that assisted them when the state did not. Although anti-Baha'i mobs in the capital were made up of "lower class" individuals, Tehranis of all classes believed that the Baha'is "constitute a political movement hostile to Shia Iran."¹⁰⁸

The mainstream Tehran press was in support of the pogrom and shared, on a daily basis, all of the inflammatory statements made by Falsafi and others, disseminating the pogrom's propaganda to whoever had not received it over the airwaves, and further editorializing in support of its goals. The May 11 issue of *Dad*, for example, claims that Bahais are a political group whose objective is to spread dissension and disrupt the country's security. To guard against this, it calls for a general purge of Bahai elements in government offices and public institutions. It goes on to frame the Baha'is as equivalent to the Communists, and to claim that the pogrom against the Baha'is has the same justification as the anti-Communist drive.¹⁰⁹

In a 1955 investigation for AUFS, Bayne notes that despite reports of rampant fanaticism, he found little evidence of this on the ground in Tehran. The soldiers guarding the seized Baha'i properties were "listless" and many of the anti-Baha'i crowds seemed "herded" rather than spontaneous. Although anti-Baha'i spectacles, such as the destruction of the Baha'i National Center's prominent dome, were staged to stir the masses, "the city did not ring with cheers." He notes that for every expression of support

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 16 / 04 / Box 141 / Folder 570.3 religion, "We are Losing Heart," AUFS report by Bayne, May 15 1955, pp. 7-8.

¹⁰⁸ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 4: 564.

¹⁰⁹ *Dad*, 20 Ordibehesht 1334 [May 11, 1955].

for the pogrom that he came across, he encountered an equal number who expressed “sadness and shame over the stupidity of it.” Not only did many working class Tehranis, including the clichéd example of the taxi driver, express disapproval of the campaign, but so did several prominent individuals, including the Shah’s half-brother and the head of the National Bank. One cook expressed disapproval, albeit without sympathy, saying that while he could understand the attacks on the Baha’is themselves, the attacks on their building’s dome perplexed him, since “the dome never hurt anyone.”¹¹⁰

In Mashhad, Hedayatollah Rahimi (the legal advisor of USOM and the American consulate’s local Baha’i contact) was “naturally disturbed” by the pogrom, but did not feel that Mashhad would face serious violence since American pressure had prevented anti-Baha’i riots in Tehran and Mashhad always took its lead from the capital.¹¹¹ Indeed, most coverage of the Baha’i issue in Mashhad did not treat it as a local issue, instead denying the existence of Baha’is in this holy city and seeing the controversy as primarily a problem for Tehran and other cities.¹¹² A few papers did, however, stress the immediacy of the Baha’i threat. *Nur-e-Khorasan*, for example, claimed that Mashhad was a “fortress for the Baha’is” and that their numbers had greatly increased in recent years, “especially in the Government departments.” *Nur-e-Iran* made similar claims and

¹¹⁰ Bayne, “Bahais Again,” p. 1.

¹¹¹ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 1: 8.

¹¹² Despite their low profile, there were several thousand Baha’is in the Mashhad area, according to their figures, and many of these were described as being among the “intelligent people” of Mashhadi society. In addition to members of the modern middle class typically employed by the government, the Mashhadi Baha’i community also consisted of professionals and merchants. Some Baha’is even managed to become “relatively prosperous shopkeepers” despite the fact that “their continued presence in this holy city is considered an affront by devout Moslems.” (USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 1: 8; TNAPRO, FO 371 / 140791 / EP 1017 / 3, report by Barrington, February 25, 1959).

threatened to list the names of all Baha'is in the city working for the government, banks, and factories.¹¹³

Rahimi's analysis proved correct, since, although there was widespread support for the pogrom and strong and diffuse negative feelings towards the Baha'is, there was only limited anti-Baha'i action in Mashhad. Still, there was in this pilgrimage center "a considerable feeling of satisfaction that Baha'is were under attack." In terms of active involvement, the most significant episodes were orchestrated by Afsah al-Mutakallimin, who organized an attack on the Mashhad Baha'i Center. As a result, he was arrested in late May for "anti-government statements" which was the new euphemism for anti-Baha'ism.¹¹⁴

Anti-Baha'i hostility within Mashhad was complicated by the close proximity of several military divisions whose leadership was generally supportive of the Baha'is. Assistant military attaché, Lt. Colonel Erwin Forsythe (the commanding general of the 8th Division), expressed his concern over the attacks on Baha'is, since "some of his most capable officers were of that sect." Major Mohammed-Ali Arsham (the acting chief of G2) and Colonel Behseresht likewise expressed opposition to the pogrom and apprehension about the consequences of the loss of Baha'i officers. General Shahrokhsahi expressed similar views and claimed to be "embarrassed" by the military's participation in the pogrom.¹¹⁵

In Isfahan, despite the large Baha'i population (twenty thousand members in the greater Isfahan area),¹¹⁶ there were only a handful of occasions in which the harassment

¹¹³ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 25: 855.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, Reel 1: 7-9.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, Reel 24: 286.

of Baha'is crossed the threshold into organized violence. The most significant incident occurred on May 7, when a large crowd gathered at a mosque in north-western Isfahan and then moved toward the Baha'i Centre located on Seyyed Ali Khan Street, near the American Consulate, with the stated intention of destroying the center and then burning it. The police heard of the agitation, however, and preemptively seized the property on the pretext of "protection" and dispersed the mob. After that, police guarded and occupied the building and neither clerics nor Baha'is approached it. Another significant incident occurred in the nearby village of Ahfoos, in a Bakhtiari tribal area eighty miles west of Isfahan. In this incident, a village mob attacked a local Baha'i Centre (which had been too small and too rural to warrant being occupied by security forces), and burned it to the ground. Although no one died in the attack, the Baha'is of this village, as well as those in nearby Najafabad, were made to suffer various "unpleasantries."¹¹⁷ Najafabad was also one of the few places in Iran that enthusiastically took up Borujerdi's call for an economic boycott against the Baha'is.¹¹⁸ Later, in the village of Ardestan, the "Baha'i Quarter" was attacked and male Baha'is were beaten and ordered to curse their religion and their ancestors or else witness assaults on their female relatives, who were hiding underground. After the humiliation of the attacks, assaults, and tortured dissimulation, most left their ancestral home for the anonymity of the cities, leaving only a handful behind. The same tactic was used in Zazereh, but in this village no one would recant under torture. After this incident, that village's Baha'i community also tried to flee to the anonymity of the cities but was prevented from leaving and the persecution continued. An elderly Baha'i woman, for example, was led through the streets on a leash and made

¹¹⁷ Ibid., *Iraq, 1955-1959*, Reel 15: 141.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 2:79.

to name all the Baha'i women in the town and graphically slander their morality. The gendarmerie were called in and, despite their new orders to protect the Baha'is, they made no efforts to do so and demanded food and bribes from the Baha'is for simply being there.¹¹⁹

These rural incidents were in sharp contrast to the relative calm in Isfahan itself following the active involvement of security forces. This was partly because of the superior security forces in the city, but also because Isfahani Baha'is maintained a low profile and were not segregated and immediately identifiable, as was often the case in the rural areas. Unlike some other Baha'i communities that were more bold and assertive in making their existence felt and seeking converts, the Isfahan Baha'is did not strongly proselytize and were "content to render themselves as inconspicuous as possible by leading quiet and orderly lives."¹²⁰ They worked mostly for the government, with about one-fifth employed in the civil service. The number would be higher, but "both the army and the civil service seem almost to have an unofficial [upper] quota of Baha'is."¹²¹ Despite the handicaps that it faced, the Baha'i community in Isfahan was growing rapidly in this period, a development that met the approval of the American consulate since

...their increases in numbers should mean an improvement in ethical and moral standards of the community... [since they] are persons of greater honesty and higher ethical standards and with a more "Western" way of life... They are most noteworthy for their higher moral standards and ethics, and if their adherents do increase, the effect on the general life should be invigorating and proportionally tend to pull the people in general out of their backwardness and corruption.¹²²

¹¹⁹ Ibid., Reel 24: 342.

¹²⁰ Ibid., *Iraq, 1955-1959*, Reel 15: 141.

¹²¹ Ibid., *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 286.

¹²² Ibid., 287.

Col. Enayatollah Sohrab, the “leader” of the Isfahani Baha’is (i.e. an elected member of the community’s local leadership), who discussed the pogrom with American diplomats, claimed that according to “his people” with inside information, the pogrom occurred because the Shah was taking a page from his father’s playbook and was feigning to the Right before attempting a major move to the Left. In his analysis, the Shah was attempting “to prove his religious zeal and increase his popularity before inaugurating an unspecified but possibly unpopular policy [of progressive reform].”¹²³ The implication being that the planned reforms would be to the detriment of the clergy and would probably be criticized as un-Islamic, i.e. land reform. Sohrab pointed out that before Reza Shah made anti-Islamic reforms he had followed the same pattern and first “launched a campaign against the Bahais, closed down their schools, and threw them out of government jobs.” He was able to “weaken the influence of the Moslem clergy by [first] setting the stage with a demonstration of himself as a staunch Moslem.”¹²⁴ Of course, this pre-emptive demonstration of Islamic credentials did not ultimately help Reza Shah, but Sohrab was rather convinced of the veracity of his sources.

Despite the uneven distribution of anti-Baha’i violence, there was a general acceptance in Iran of the idea that the Baha’is deserved what happened to them. There were expressions of regret, disgust, and disapproval, but these were almost always made in private conversations. Public criticism of the pogrom within Iran was mostly limited to objections to the disruption of order, to the damage that was allowed to be done to Iran’s reputation abroad, and to the Hidden Hand of the British supposedly again sowing internal dissent. There were many critics of the pogrom, but almost none of them

¹²³ Ibid., *Iraq, 1955-1959*, Reel 15: 140.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 142.

defended the Baha'i victims, with most going in the other direction, prefacing their words with the caveat that they had no sympathy for the Baha'is. A notable exception to this was Mujtaba Minuvi, the editor of the periodical *Yaghma*, who opposed the pogrom on moral and humanitarian grounds.¹²⁵ Another prominent defense of the Baha'is came from Tehran's *imam jom'eh*. He had led the mid-day prayers before Falsafi's sermon over state radio but, upon hearing Falsafi's lies and calls to violence, he showed his disapproval by voting with his feet, standing up and walking out on Falsafi. In his view, the Shah should have done likewise and "taken decisive action as soon the tone of Falsafi's sermons became apparent."¹²⁶

The impact of the pogrom

Looking back on the 1955 pogrom several years later, Alam judged that this episode brought Iran "to the brink of catastrophe."¹²⁷ The disaster that was barely averted concerned more than just the fate of the Baha'i minority or Iran's international reputation and relationships. Iran's economy was also seriously endangered.

Prime Minister Ala was worried that the anti-Baha'i pogrom would scare away potential American investment.¹²⁸ This fear was also expressed by Minister Saleh and others. While in the United States, Saleh had been confronted about the anti-Baha'i violence in the headquarters of a vacuum company and was humiliated as he attempted to apologize for his government. After that, he avoided public appearances in America because "he was ashamed of the Baha'i mess in Iran." He later met with the Shah and

¹²⁵ *Yaghma* no. 82 (Ordibehesht 1334) and no. 83 (Tir 1334). For an example of an article that objects on political rather than moral grounds, see Sulaymani, *Sahar* no.7 (6 Tir 1334).

¹²⁶ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 1 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Fearnley, May 11, 1955.

¹²⁷ Alam, *Goftoguha-ye Man ba Shah*, part one, pp. 66-67.

¹²⁸ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 1: 175.

convinced him that the anti-Baha'i pogrom was causing a withdrawal of confidence in his government. As an example, he noted that the Squib Corporation was going to cancel plans for drug-manufacturing operations in Iran due to the anti-Baha'i violence.¹²⁹

The potential dismissal of Baha'i employees was also a major cause of concern, as it would negatively impact the government's ability to function, because of the high percentage of employees who were Baha'is.¹³⁰ Although they were often blocked from the most senior positions, Baha'is often attained mid-level positions in both the civilian and military hierarchies. According to Tehran's *imam jom'eh* (Friday prayer leader), for example, there were about one thousand Baha'i officers in the army alone (with his British interlocutor adding that this number "may well be correct").¹³¹ There were over two hundred thousand Baha'is in Iran according to Bayne's 1955 research, with forty thousand of these living in the greater Tehran area. Despite their relatively small numbers, they "constitute an important segment of the middle class and much of its administrative strength."¹³² Although Bayne's investigations led him to believe that only 1-1.5% of Iran was Baha'i, "the quality of the membership makes the group important."¹³³ According to his information:

The army, for example, has several hundred Bahai officers, at least one of whom is a major general. The National Bank employees scores of Bahais, as do most government agencies. Payrolls of Point IV¹³⁴ activities include several hundred Baha'is. The American Embassy and other embassies use Baha'is. It is safe to

¹²⁹ Ibid., 122.

¹³⁰ See, for example, USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 286.

¹³¹ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 1 / 55, Confidential Memo by Fearnley, May 11, 1955.

¹³² Bayne, "We Are Losing Heart," p. 3; Bayne, "Bahais Again" p. 8.

¹³³ Ibid., "We Are Losing Heart," p. 3.

¹³⁴ Point IV (*Asl-e Chahar*) was the popular Iranian designation for the attempts at a Marshall Plans for Iran. Officially, the development attempt operated as TCI (Technical Cooperation for Iran) until 1953 when it became known as USOM/I (United States Operations Mission in Iran).

assume that there are more Baha'is in official agencies than there are members of any other minority group...¹³⁵

Due to their crucial mid-management positions, the type of wholesale dismissals of Baha'is that Borujerdi requested would have impaired the government's ability to function. In connection with this, the British Ambassador believed that it would be "most unfortunate" if Baha'is were removed from the country's civil and military infrastructure as this would be "depriving Iran of valuable servants in these critical times."¹³⁶

There was also displeasure in the bazaar and the financial sector because of the anti-Baha'i pogrom. Baha'is had a reputation for honesty and trustworthiness and it was felt that, in general, "Baha'is are more competent."¹³⁷ In Bayne's view, the Baha'is in Tehran played the same vital and prominent role that the Jews of Baghdad played before their forced exodus. Because of their reputations for honesty, they were given "positions of some importance" and this was analogous to "finding Chinese cashiers in Japanese banks and vice versa."¹³⁸ They were allowed to rise to positions of some prominence, but typically barred from the highest positions. Bayne even reported hearing from an associate that "As a Muslim banker, I tell you that the Bahais are the most reliable element in the bazaar. Being a Bahai is a good credit rating in itself." The same source noted that the "utter nonsense" of the pogrom was a symptom of the government's incompetence in general and, as a result of this folly, the bazaar "is in great difficulties now."¹³⁹ The pogrom caused large numbers of Baha'is to simultaneously liquidate their assets out of uncertainty about what the future held for them. In so doing, they were

¹³⁵ Bayne, "Bahais Again" pp. 7-8.

¹³⁶ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 1 / 55, Confidential Memo by Stevens, May 10, 1955.

¹³⁷ Bayne, "Bahais Again" p. 9.

¹³⁸ Ibid., pp. 7-8.

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 2.

drawing substantial funds from the operating capital of the bazaar. The result has been a series of major bankruptcies, carrying with them a score of minor crashes, because the bazaar is a sensitive center of Iranian commerce in a country always short of operating capital.¹⁴⁰

“The fire now burning”

Despite the government’s reversal on anti-Baha’i action, violence continued sporadically into the summer, especially in more provincial locations. Since it was widely believed that the Shah reversed himself due to American pressure, anti-Baha’i activists began to target not only the Baha’is but also the Americans and even the Shah himself.

The first significant anti-Baha’i action following the end of Ramadan occurred in Shiraz on May 26th. On this occasion, Ayatollah Shirazi’s Brotherhood Party attacked Baha’i properties on the very day that the Shah was visiting Shiraz. The attack on the soft target of the Baha’is was actually a proxy attack on the Shah himself, since the timing was deliberate and the spectacle was staged in such a way that the Shah would witness it during his visit. Anger had been building over the Shah’s reversal on the Baha’i issue, but the anti-Baha’i forces were said to have been “biding their time” until the Shah’s visit. The spectacle shocked, scared, and angered the Shah, who recognized that he was the true target of the protests. Up until this point, the Shah had been lukewarm in his response to British and American calls for him to turn against the clergy, doing the absolute minimum needed to satisfy his patrons while limiting the damage that was being done to his relationship with his conservative base. After May 26, however, he

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. This is also mentioned in a Russian source, which claims that, as a result of fear generated by the pogrom, Baha’is collectively withdrew 1.5 billion *rials* in a short period of time. See Akhavi, *Religion and Politics*, p 220 n51.

accepted Alam's advice that firm opposition to the clergy was needed, promising Alam that he would "treat them rough" and "no longer compromise."¹⁴¹

In order to break the ties between the Baha'is and the Americans, anti-Baha'i activists began to push for Baha'is to be removed from positions in American and international endeavors, such as Point IV. There were hundreds of Baha'is employed by these agencies and, although there is no indication that any Baha'is were dismissed from these positions as a result of the clerical push, there was a great deal of fear that, when the Iranian government took over these projects, most Baha'is would be fired.¹⁴² In British discussions of this American problem, they noted their own small number of Baha'i employees when compared to the Americans, who "have quite a number of Baha'i employees in this country."¹⁴³ According to a consulate report, Point IV initially wanted to conduct its activities through Baha'is exclusively, but after strong local objections they were forced to abandon this plan and include Muslims as well as several hundred Baha'is.¹⁴⁴ It was because of this large Baha'i presence in Point IV that, as part of the Ramadan pogrom, a Point IV vehicle was attacked and its windows smashed.¹⁴⁵

Some clerical polemic continued Falsafi's earlier attempts to use Cold War scare tactics to cause the Americans to break with the Baha'is. The Americans were warned that Baha'is were at every Tudeh meeting, that they were a political tool of Communist irreligion, and that there was no distinction between Baha'is and Communists. They were portrayed as inveterate liars and Communist deceivers to be rooted out. In the June 18 issue of *Tufan*, for example, this verbose headline appears:

¹⁴¹ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 23 / 55, Stevens to FO, June 1, 1955.

¹⁴² NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 16 / 04 / Box 141 / Folder 570.3 – Religion, Isfahan Consulate to American Embassy, September 7, 1955.

¹⁴³ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 1 / 55, Confidential Memo by Fearnley, May 11, 1955.

¹⁴⁴ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 287; Bayne, "Bahais Again" pp. 7-8.

¹⁴⁵ *Aftab-e Sharq*, 28 and 29 Ordibehesht 1334 [May 19 and 20, 1955].

By propagating their party and communistic Bahatism and Babism (the inseparable parts of the Tudeh party), the communists make efforts to strengthen their influence in the Islamic countries. Meanwhile, the Baha'i spies work to deceive the great personalities of the United States of America in order to put the foundation of this dangerous objective in the U.S. president's White House.¹⁴⁶

In this article, Baha'is are portrayed as not only co-sponsors of Iranian Communism, but also part of a vast international conspiracy that aimed to subvert not only Iran but also the White House. The article continues its attempt to warn America about Baha'ism by fabricating a story in which an American Consul was at a party and mentioned casually that there were a million Baha'is in Iran. Ignoring the fact that Falsafi himself used the same figure, the article's author claims that when he heard the American mention of Baha'i numbers he knew that it was the product of "the clever Bahai propagandists whose job it is to make false statistics." He claims to have confronted the American Consul and told him that, if that number were true, then out of every twenty people in Iran there would be one Baha'i, and he challenged the Consul to find anywhere near that number. In response, the apocryphal Consul (which the writer later admitted he invented) tore up the information from his Baha'i sources and said that "this party is really the champion at making false statements and big lies." The article goes on to demand that:

No matter what position they (the Baha'is) have occupied in the towns or villages they must be immediately dismissed. The adulterated drugs imported by Bahais should be destroyed and the purchase of such drugs forbidden. They must be removed from whatever villages they have entered, and they must be exiled to far distant places so that they will have no organized political party. Thus, the fire now burning which was sponsored by the Bolsheviks in this country can be put out and the ones responsible for it hanged according to the country's laws... And anyone, in whatever position or rank, who is supporting the so-called Baha'is who are led by their dirty boss, [Shoghi Effendi], must be assumed to be a partner in

¹⁴⁶ *Tufan*, 27 Khordad 1334 [June 18, 1955 - cited in USDS, *Iraq, 1955-1959*, Reel 15: 148-9].

this crime and must be punished. Transactions with Bahais or Babis have been forbidden by Ayatollah Borujerdi and other authorities. No such barter or transactions, therefore, must be practiced with this party. Otherwise nothing will have been gained from the closing of their [Center] and all the recent talk about this disastrous party which has ruined the life and reputation of this country.¹⁴⁷

This article, clearly coming from a supporter of Borujerdi, is calling for the violent extermination not only of the “dirty” Baha’is, but of anyone “of whatever position or rank” who supports them (i.e. potentially the Shah or Americans in Iran). It also clearly expresses frustration at the possibility that “nothing will have been gained” by the pogrom, even though it “has ruined the life and reputation of this country.”

In a June 28 meeting between the paper’s editor, Jafar Fesharaki, and Robert Berret, the American Vice-Consul in Isfahan, the editor admitted that he had fabricated the encounter with the American officer, and agreed to print a retraction. In the rest of the meeting, he attempted to lobby the Americans to cease their protection of the Baha’is. In this effort, he tried to “minimize the number of Baha’is in Iran and to maximize their subversive activities.” He said that there were only twenty thousand Baha’is in Iran and that they “were the same as Bolsheviks.” He claimed to have been told by General Zarqam that in every Tudeh meeting he raided he had found Baha’is among them. He used this Cold War rationale to urge the Americans to dismiss all of their Baha’i employees. When he sensed this approach was not working, he tried to urge Baha’i dismissals by appealing to the perceived new “Great Game” between Britain and America for control of Iran. “He said that close association between the Americans and the Baha’is enables the English to enlist more easily the aid of devoted Moslems in furtherance of the British policy to frustrate American objectives in Iran.” When he was

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

informed that the Consulate had no intention to fire Baha'is merely for their religious identity, he threatened to contact Falsafi and force the firings of the Baha'is in Point IV after it was transferred to Iranian control, promising that “the campaign against Bahaism would continue just as the one against the Tudeh and the Communists.”¹⁴⁸

When the Americans remained steadfast in their support for the Baha'is, lobbying efforts of this sort were abandoned and there was a rhetorical shift towards directly targeting America and its institutions. The clerical perception of the Shah also shifted in this period. Whereas he was previously seen as a sympathetic young ruler who suffered the growth of the Baha'i threat out of ignorance, his reversal on the Baha'i issue and active turn against the anti-Baha'i cause caused him to be perceived as no better than the Baha'is, i.e. he was seen to be acting as an agent of foreign powers, placing self-interest over national interest, by continuing to allow Baha'is in high positions despite now being thoroughly familiar with the arguments against them.

This led to a blurring of anti-Baha'ism, anti-Americanism, and anti-regime sentiment that was best expressed in the plans for an Islamic coup later in the summer. In this plan, which was done in the name of Borujerdi but apparently without his approval, cleric-led forces were to seize power during the commemoration of Ashura [August 1955] and demand that the Shah immediately remove the Americans who were in Iran with Point IV and the Baha'is in government. If the Shah did not immediately turn against the Americans and the Baha'is—who were treated as twin targets—Islamic rule would begin.¹⁴⁹ This episode is treated in more detail in Chapter VII. Although the Islamic coup was not viable, it shows how anti-Baha'ism and anti-Americanism were

¹⁴⁸ USDS, *Iraq, 1955-1959*, Reel 15: 150.

¹⁴⁹ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 1: 228-229.

conflated and how the regime as a whole came to begin to be marked as “Baha’i” and “American,” and targeted as such, with Islamic rule presented as a viable replacement for the existing regime.

Conclusion

Although ostensibly an attack on a religious heresy, the anti-Baha’i pogrom served primarily as a catalytic agent, stripping away the superficial calm of the post-Mosaddeq years to reveal the deep fissures and conflicted foundations of Iranian modernity. It was, moreover, the trigger behind a series of important reversals, as the ulama’s strategic bond with the new Shah, which had survived even the Mosaddeq years, collapsed under the weight of the Shah’s obligations to his foreign patrons, and the earlier British and American plan to use the ulama in the struggle against the Left was sidelined by new policies emphasizing stability and reform, both of which were perceived to be threatened by clerical activism. It also served as a test of power not just for the Shah’s first attempt at direct rule, but also for Borujerdi’s symbolic capital and for the strength of American influence over her new client. It was designed as an object lesson to put Baha’is “in their place,” and it was largely successful in this—as Baha’is retreated from the public sphere and the idea of a large Baha’i temple became unthinkable—but it had the unintended consequence of disrupting the ulama’s place in Iran, as the clergy’s relationship with the Shah unraveled due to British and American pressure for him to put the ulama “in their place.”

Tavakoli-Targhi has identified the short-lived Court-clergy partnership in the anti-Baha’i pogrom as both the “peak” and the “beginning of the end” of Court-clergy

collaboration in the Pahlavi period. For fourteen years, the clerical hierarchy and the new Shah had been growing closer together through common opposition to Tudeh and Mosaddeq and a mutually beneficial relationship in which the Shah allowed the reversal of his father's anti-Islamic policies and in exchange won the loyalty and the legitimizing political support of the clergy. As a result of the clerical revival and political activism that the Shah had allowed, an "Islamic public sphere" emerged that, with the anti-Baha'i drive, "became united and of one mind." By initially joining in this political movement, the Shah won unprecedented popularity in clerical circles but, by suddenly changing course and sabotaging this phenomenon that he had helped to construct, he completely destroyed this relationship and "annulled the historic union between the state and clergy."¹⁵⁰ As a result, the ulama broke with the regime. Although this new orientation was not explicitly expressed until 1963, Tavakoli-Targhi claims that the anti-regime stance of 1963 was actually a continuation of the post-1955 turn against the Shah. His conclusions are accurate although they are mostly speculation and he does adequately support this claim. Subsequent chapters of this study provide some of the missing pieces that connect 1955 to 1963 and add further support to this argument.

¹⁵⁰ Tavakoli-Targhi, "Anti-Bahaism," p. 220.

CHAPTER V

“A Characteristically Messy Compromise”: The Failure of Borujerdi’s Loyal Opposition

Introduction

The anti-Baha’i pogrom of 1955 officially ended with the symbolically-charged destruction of the dome of the National Bahai Center on the last day of Ramadan (May 22). Despite the outward appearance of a month-long pogrom, governmental support had actually been withdrawn earlier in May after Anglo-American pressure caused the Shah to abandon support for the campaign. After this loss of active governmental support, the anti-Baha’i campaign died a slow death as closed-door attempts were made to persuade Falsafi and Borujerdi to accept and abide by this cessation voluntarily, so that the regime would not be made to publically appear as defenders of the Baha’is.

The public spectacle of the destruction of the prominent dome of the Baha’i national Center was a face-saving gesture by the government to smooth over clerical anger at the Shah’s abrupt reversal on the Bahai matter. It did not work. Borujerdi continued to insist that the government legally commit itself to dismiss all Bahais from the military and the civil service. A test of wills resulted, as Borujerdi intensely pressured the government on this issue during the interregnum between the conclusion of Ramadan in May and the beginning of the holy month of Moharram (August 20 –

September 18). Eventually a weak compromise was reached, which not only failed to meet Borujerdi's demands, but was not enforced by the regime.

This chapter explores the long series of demands, standoffs, compromises, and betrayals over the Baha'i issue from the beginning of May until the end of August. Borujerdi ultimately failed in this standoff with the state, I argue, because of his inability to realize that the Shah had made the strategic decision to privilege Iran's obligations as a client state over the benefits of continued clerical support. While Borujerdi was slow to come to grips with this new political reality, and continued to believe that results could be achieved by working within the system, some of the Islamic associations that acted autonomously, such as the Brotherhood Party, were more successful in their confrontation with the state due to their more combative stance and better mobilization and party discipline. Borujerdi's exposure as a paper tiger paved the way for the Shah's turn against the clergy (discussed in Chapter VII), while the relative success—albeit short-lived—of the combatant associations provided inspiration for the post-Borujerdi repositioning of clerical activism discussed in Chapter VIII.

“Trying to face both ways”

In the first week of Ramadan, the Iranian government was fully supportive of Falsafi's calls for violence on state radio.¹ As objections began to be raised from London and Washington, however, the government began a cautious reversal, with Alam in the lead and the rest of the Cabinet more circumspect. Frustrated by escalating foreign pressure over the pogrom and the Cabinet's slow and cautious approach, Alam took matters into

¹ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 4: 557.

his own hands.² In the second week of the pogrom, Falsafi received the first indication of the government's change of position through a phone call from Alam. Alam reportedly said, "Mr. Falsafi, I do not permit you to speak in this way concerning the Baha'is." He further indicated that he would not let Falsafi "disrupt security and become the cause of a bloodbath (*khun-rizi*)!" In his memoir, Falsafi claims that he chastised Alam for his disrespectful tone. Following this admonition, Alam framed the government's objection in terms of security and stability, and indicated that they were receiving reports from the provinces concerning attacks on the Baha'is and that this strike at the Baha'is was also resulting in a "strike at order and security (*nezam va amniyat*)."³ Falsafi responded with the argument that his aim was only "to unveil the depravity (*gomrahi*) of the Baha'is" and that this revelation was simply stirring up the "self-protection of the people."³ Still, Alam's warnings had some effect, and Falsafi's broadcasts began to feature the caveat that order must be maintained in the anti-Baha'i efforts. Alam called him back to express approval of this shift in tone, and to arrange a meeting to discuss how order could be maintained moving forward.⁴

On May 9, shortly after the mob action in Tehran that led to the seizure of the Haziratu'l-Quds (National Baha'i Center), Alam met with Falsafi and attempted to intimidate him into halting all calls for anti-Baha'i action, issuing an ultimatum. When Falsafi ignored his threats, Alam was forced to take the matter to the Shah and seek the support of other cabinet ministers. In a characteristically dramatic way, he let it be known

² At first, Alam was hesitant to take action to resolve the Baha'i matter because of his impression that the Americans might still wish to use the clerics as a bulwark against communism, but Fearnley (of the British Embassy) assuaged his fears and informed him "that the impression I gathered was that the Americans were worried in the opposite direction, namely that the mullahs might become even more reactionary" (TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 18 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Fearnley, May 24, 1955).

³ Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi*, p. 201.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 202.

“that he was quite prepared to sacrifice his own office if it were necessary to bring this nonsense to an end.”⁵ This was not necessary, however, since he was able to rally adequate support for his position. Still, the Cabinet felt that it was best to avoid a public break with the ulama. As such, it was agreed that Falsafi would be allowed to speak about purely religious issues during his radio broadcasts for the remainder of the holy month, but that he would be instructed to call for the cessation of all anti-Baha’i activities and for the restoration of order. After rallying some support from the Shah and other ministers,

They sent word to Burujerdi in Qum not to encourage Falsafi further... [and] will tell Falsafi this morning to omit reference to Bahais in his sermons, failing which he would be literally taken off the pulpit. The threat is to be communicated to him by Gen. Bakhtiar who is also the one to carry it out, if need be.⁶

Falsafi describes this surprise meeting as the point at which the government’s reversal on the Baha’i issue became obvious to him. He relates that he was reading one morning when, without prior warning, he was visited by General Bakhtiar (the military-governor of Tehran and Iran’s intelligence czar) and Major-General Alavi-Moqadam (the national police chief). They told him that they had just seen the Shah and that “he ordered that the two of us come here together and notify you that from today onwards you are no longer to speak concerning the Baha’is.” In his typically self-congratulatory and somewhat dubious style, Falsafi claims in his memoirs that he remained calm and rational in the face of their aggression, as he had before in the face of Alam’s harsh words. In reply, he “gently said” that removing him from the airwaves “is not in the best interest (*maslahat*) of the people” and “is not well thought-out.” Denying the public his

⁵ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 1 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Stevens, May 10, 1955.

⁶ Ibid.

message, he argued, “will be to the detriment of the public good.” Faced with his intransigence, the pair took on a “dictatorial manner” and insisted: “No, His Majesty explicitly gave us the message that you were to speak no more.” Just as Falsafi was about to respond angrily, he claims to have received divine inspiration (*khoda tafazel kard*), enabling him to call their bluff. He announced that there were only four options before them: they could imprison him before he could resume his sermons, they could allow him to resume preaching and simply not broadcast it, they could allow him a final broadcast to explain that the Shah had sent them to instruct him to not speak against the Baha’is, or they could allow him to continue as before.⁷

They supposedly replied, “No... Sir, His Majesty has commanded that you not say a thing, and that it not be made public that this is done on His command.” Falsafi mocked this glass-jawed bullying, in which all he had to do to gain the upper hand was to threaten to say in public what had been said in private. Sensing that they had assumed that he would simply fold before this intimidation, and that they lacked any clear plan for what to do if this failed to silence him, Falsafi ended the meeting by telling them to throw him in jail, if they dared, or else allow him to complete his broadcasts as before.⁸

Lacking the political will to publically stand against Falsafi and appear as the defenders of the Baha’is, the Cabinet was internally divided about what to do next, which, in practice, allowed Falsafi to continue to speak against the Baha’is as long as he continued to also call for the maintenance of order. The internal divisions of the Shah’s government provided a brief opening for Falsafi and Borujerdi, as the government had exposed its true intentions but simultaneously demonstrated the unlikelihood that it

⁷ Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi*, pp. 205-06.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 206.

would completely shut down anti-Baha'i efforts before the end of the month, as long as order was not further disrupted. To take advantage of this window of opportunity, action on the streets was pre-empted by a political push to ensure that anti-Baha'i legislation could be obtained before the bully pulpit afforded by the national radio broadcasts was lost at the end of the month.

In an attempt to explain to the British Ambassador the difficult situation that faced the Cabinet, the Acting Prime Minister emphasized

that the Government was in a cleft stick. They could not afford to have an outbreak of disorder which would be used by their enemies as a basis for attacking them and comparing their record unfavourably with that of the Zahedi Administration. A number of General Zahedi's supporters were already coming out actively against the Bahais with the object of embarrassing the Government. On the other hand, they would have to proceed very circumspectly in curbing Moslem enthusiasm lest they should set the bulk of the country against them. They could not respond to the demand for outlawing the Bahais by legislation because on legal grounds there was no case for it. The Bahais, unlike the Christians, Jews, or Zoroastrians were not an officially protected minority and had no legal status as it was... Government is hoping that by using soft words all round they can calm excited spirits, and that the storm will blow over. They are certainly trying to face both ways, e.g. Mr. Entezam [the Acting Prime Minister] admitted that the occupation of the Bahai [centers]—in some of which Islamic rites had been ostentatiously performed—was intended to be regarded by the Baha'is as a protective measure and by the Moslems as a move against the Bahais. But they hope, by offering to study the subject, to avoid being pushed into more extreme measures. There are signs that Falsafi has somewhat moderated his attacks in the last two days. Whatever happens, there is a danger that the position and influence of the mullahs will be strengthened at the expense of the Government⁹.

As Entezam indicated, the push for new legislation was deflected with the argument that existing legislation was sufficient. This strategy can be seen in a closed-door majles session on May 10, over the Baha'i issue. A bill was introduced that explicitly conveyed the illegality of the Baha'i Faith. There were numerous speeches in

⁹ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 1 / 55, Stevens to FO May 12, 1955.

support of this bill, including several that urged that it must go farther and legalize the seizing of Baha'i property. Speaker Hekmat, however, called for caution and moderation, after first qualifying his statements by affirming that he was also opposed to the Baha'is. The calls for restraint were echoed by others, but were not accepted by the majority until Deputy Nureddin Emami, a respected deputy from a prominent clerical family, argued that the Constitution recognizes Islam as the official religion and additionally recognizes the three Religions of the Book (Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism) as "our patriotic brethren." In contrast, "all Iranians knew Bahaism for what it was: the creature of foreign influence in Iran."¹⁰ Since this was already known, he argued, and implicit in the Constitution, there was no need for new legislation, or else this would set the precedent that the Constitutional omission was not sufficient, and the majles would be forced to draft a new bill for each and every sect that was not among the four recognized religions.

As part of the rushed and intense push for legislative action, a group of cleric-deputies in the majles, loyal to Borujerdi and led by Ahmad Safa'i, crafted anti-Baha'i legislation that featured the following four articles:

Article 1 – The wicked group of the [Baha'is], who have been the opponents of the security of the country, are now declared illegal.

Article 2 – From now on, membership in this group, its public display (*tazahor*), and dependence on it, in any fashion, will be a crime (*bazah*). The convicted offender will be imprisoned in solitary confinement for terms of two to ten years, and be deprived of civil rights.

Article 3 – Properties which serve as gathering places for this group and are used by its affiliated organizations, as well as the revenue that has been spent on affairs relating to this group, will be transferred to the Ministry of Culture and be

¹⁰ NACPM, RG 469 / 250 / 81/ 14 /2-7 / Box 19 / folder 350 – political, "Secret Session of Majles," May 10, 1955.

allocated for the establishment of organizations for education and propagating religious [Islamic] education and the tenets of piety.

Article 4 – Individuals from this group who are presently serving as employees in governmental departments and their affiliates are expelled from governmental service from this day on, and will not in any way enjoy the protection of the labor laws.¹¹

Falsafi met with the Minister of the Interior about the proposed legislation and was initially optimistic, claiming that Alam had told him that “the full attention of the government is focused on the matter of the struggle against the Baha’i sect.”¹² He also claimed that many of the majles deputies were involved in “their own mobilization for the ratification of legislation recognizing the illegality of the Baha’i sect.” Lobbying efforts accelerated as arrangements were made for letters, telegraphs and other appeals to arrive from the provinces and express grassroots support for “steps to eradicate what remains of this sect” and a national desire that the majles honor “the requests of those they represent.” In the midst of this hostile environment for minorities, Falsafi even applied pressure on the representatives of the official minorities in the majles, winning their support and claiming that even they view the Baha’is with complete anger (*‘asabani*) and hatred (*tanaffor*) and that they had joined ranks with the Muslim deputies in the majles against the Baha’i threat.¹³

Alam and his supporters in the Cabinet had apparently not anticipated that the government’s abandonment of the anti-Baha’i cause would precipitate an invigorated clerical push for anti-Baha’i legislation. Particularly troubling for the government was the desire for binding legislation that would force them to dismiss the tens of thousands

¹¹ *Kayhan*, 20 Ordibehesht 1334 [May 11, 1955].

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi*, p. 206 n1.

of Baha'is employed by the government, which could potentially break the nation's administrative infrastructure. According to the Acting Prime Minister:

It was being suggested that punitive legislation should take the form of removing the Bahais from all government posts (there are a considerable number of distinguished and able Bahais in the Army and the National Bank, as well as in Government Departments). Any move to expel them would therefore have serious administrative consequences.¹⁴

Despite the problems that their removal would cause his government, Entezam felt that the pogrom was largely the Baha'is own fault as they

had behaved rather foolishly in recent years; they had increased their propaganda and came out more into the open; while many of the accusations they were plotting against the regime, etc. were undoubtedly exaggerated they had the reputation of being international and of owing allegiance to humanity first and Persia second. This meant that they were an easy target for nationalist sentiment.¹⁵

Stevens, the British ambassador, speculated that the regime's strong rejection of anti-Baha'i legislation was spurred by a fear of what this precedent would mean for other groups, since some members of the Cabinet were masons and

there had been signs during the previous day's debate that Moslem parliamentary leaders might also be planning a simultaneous attack on freemasonry and [Entezam] clearly fears that a demon of intolerance has been unleashed which may devour more than its original prey.¹⁶

In spite of the continuation of clerical pressure for anti-Baha'i legislation, the Ministry of the Interior played down concern over the Baha'i issue and suggested that there was no reason for protests in this regard, since "suppressing the actions of this sect

¹⁴ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 1 / 55, Stevens to FO May 12, 1955.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

is not a new matter,” and there was no need for new legislation since “this sect has not been officially recognized... [and] this has been the status quo across the nation for a long time; this is not a novel development.”¹⁷

In his May 11 broadcast, Falsafi claimed that he would refrain from calling for strong anti-Baha’i action until May 17, on the pretext that elements might subvert the “popular feelings for their own ends.”¹⁸ This date was announced as the end of his period of silence because that was when he had been promised that the majles would take action against the Baha’is. To build up popular expectations, Falsafi claimed that the Shah “had seen some mullahs and told them he would support the feelings of all Muslims and fight against anti-religious forces [i.e. the Baha’is].” He asked his listeners to shift the focus from the Baha’is to the majles and to “keep up pressure” for action against the Bahais, but to also maintain “an atmosphere of calm.”¹⁹ His audience was urged to send telegrams and petitions to the majles in support of new anti-Baha’i legislation. As Entezam explained to Fearnley, “In the last day or two Falsafi has continued to be less fiery, but he is speaking in a way which is clearly intended to keep the Government up to the mark as regards action against the Baha’is.”²⁰ In Fearnley’s view, “Falsafi is still keeping this in play and has promised to let the people know soon what should be done about the Bahais.”²¹

The government was now placed in a very difficult position. Although they were very worried about negative foreign reactions to continued persecution, they were more worried about riots in that capital and afraid of “the consequences here should [the Shah]

¹⁷ *Ettela’at*, 19 Ordibehesht 1334 [May 10, 1955].

¹⁸ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 4: 562.

¹⁹ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 1 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Fearnley, May 11, 1955.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 2 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Fearnley, received May 17, 1955.

fly in the face of public hysteria to silence agitators or protect Bahais.”²² They had, nevertheless, succeeded in getting Falsafi to restrain himself and to reject explicit calls for violence. They were also able to delay the various anti-Baha’i bills in the majles, although worried deputies were “being deluged with letters and telegrams urging strong action.”

The Shah’s inner circle was split into two camps. The conservative group—which included Amini, Ala, Entezam, and Shapour Reporter—advised that inaction was the safest course.²³ They suggested that all the government should be doing is “riding out the storm.” The other group, led by Alam, advocated strong action against the ulama. The Shah himself, facing the first serious test of leadership during his attempt at direct rule, was “apparently undecided” and, unable to choose between the two paths, attempted to walk on both simultaneously. Although he was closest to Alam, the Shah appears to have been hesitant to appear to follow the lead of a close associate, having only recently distanced himself from Ernest Perron. In an unusual break from their ubiquitous criticism of the Shah’s characteristic indecisiveness, American accounts do not attack the Shah for his indecision on this occasion since, in their view, “no matter what course it takes,” Iran’s long-term political fortunes had been weakened by its association with the pogrom.²⁴

During this period before the 17th, Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi was in communication with the Shah, using Eqbal as an intermediary. In addition to written calls for the dismissal of Baha’is, Eqbal also conveyed the oral message that “unless the Shah complied with his request” Borujerdi might “be compelled to leave home,” i.e.

²² USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 4: 562.

²³ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 114810 / EP 1018 / 29, Stevens to FO, July 7, 1955.

²⁴ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 4: 563.

move to Iraq. This was Borujerdi's ultimate threat, as the loss of face that would be caused for the Shah if Shi'ism's universal source of emulation voted with his feet would be devastating. This would be similar to the insult that would be conveyed if the Pope relocated the Vatican out of disgust at the Italian government. The Shah was upset by Borujerdi's use of this trump card, but announced that he was "prepared to face a showdown." He claimed that "if you give the mullahs an inch they will take yards and yards" and that he was no longer willing to make concessions to Borujerdi. He realized that if Borujerdi quit Iran in protest there would be extensive bazaar agitation, but he also felt that "it would be more disastrous to give way." He told Eqbal to reply that "He would be sorry if Burujerdi decided to leave; he did not expect him to make such a gesture as in the past he had always been helpful to the country... [It] would be too bad if [he] left but the decision lay in his hands."²⁵ Borujerdi did not follow through on his threat.

At this time, Alam continued to delay and obfuscate when it came to anti-Baha'i action, calling for calm and promising action towards the end of Ramadan, before finally addressed the majles on May 17 to deliver the promised response to calls for anti-Baha'i legislation.²⁶ In this open session of the lower house, he read a directive from the Ministry of the Interior addressed to Iran's governors and governor-generals. He began with a preamble indicating that the constitution and existing legislation provided sufficient authority with which to act against the Baha'is, and that no new legislation was required.²⁷ In the body of his proclamation, Baha'is are not mentioned by name. Instead,

²⁵ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1553. Secret Minute by Fearnley, May 17, 1955.

²⁶ Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi*, pp 208-09.

²⁷ Namely, the first article of the Supplementary Fundamental Laws, as well as Articles 20 and 21 of the Constitution.

Alam condemns *fitnah* (religious upheaval) and any attempts to disrupt public order. Given the context, his words are implicitly damning of the Baha'is, albeit without naming them, but the proclamation is carefully worded in such a way that its warnings and condemnations could just as easily be applied against the anti-Baha'i forces that were disrupting public order, and this is the clear subtext. According to the directive:

the formation of societies and associations that generate religious revolt (*fitnah*), irreligion, and disrupt order throughout the country are forbidden. Therefore, steps have been taken to put into effect the articles of the Constitution. The headquarters of all kinds (*har guneh*) of societies, which are the cause of religious revolt and irreligion, and are the cause of disruptions to order and security, have been closed down... Take action to prevent all kinds (*har guneh*) of political demonstrations and actions by these sorts of groups that are forbidden according to the law. At the same time, taking steps in these matters and implementing laws is the duty of government officials, and the interference of other individuals and groups will be responsible for causing the disruption of order and security...²⁸

The repeated use of the vague plural (“all kinds”) when referring to groups and organizations, the emphasis on the government’s monopoly on the use of force, and the centering of criticism on disorder and protest rather than on the alleged crimes of the Baha'is clearly indicate what Alam is conveying between the lines. The remainder of the proclamation is even more explicit in its criticism of, and warning to, the ulama. Alam admonishes “certain individuals” (i.e. Falsafi and Borujerdi) for inciting the public under “the pretext and guise of battling with the sinister (*gomrah konandeh*) sects.”²⁹

Alam’s vagueness and back-peddling on the Bahai issue enraged Borujerdi’s representatives in the majles. Safa’i openly opposed Alam’s directive, claiming that the government must be “explicit” in its opposition to the Baha’is. “Do not be bashful concerning this sect that is responsible for religious and worldly upheaval,” Safa’i

²⁸ Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi*, p. 208n1; *Kayhan*, 26 Ordibehesht 1334 [May 17, 1955].

²⁹ *Ibid.*

cautioned. He feared that some would be hesitant to deal with the Baha'i question and would use the excuse that opposing the Baha'is "is contrary to the U.N. charter," but that by this logic one must also free the Leftists.³⁰ Alam ignored these criticisms.

In his tough-sounding, but ultimately non-binding directive, Alam did not actually promise any of the legislative interventions demanded by Borujerdi and Falsafi. Instead, all he really did was limit both Baha'i and anti-Baha'i gatherings. With less than a week remaining until the end of Ramadan, this legislative bone was a stop-gap measure that the Cabinet thought might offer the ulama a face-saving "victory" that would keep things calm at least until the month was over. As it was, violent incidents had largely ceased as a result of the pressure that was brought to bear on Falsafi and other clerics. Alam's directive was an attempt to maintain this new status quo and to conclude Ramadan in a way that would not leave the ulama with nothing to show for their efforts, but which would also satisfy Western insistence that violence cease and that the Baha'is not be declared illegal or dismissed *en masse*.

In his continuing Ramadan broadcasts, Falsafi tried to put a positive spin on Alam's condemnation of the Baha'is in the majles. He congratulated all involved for their "wise decision," and hailed it as the "fruition of the anti-Bahai campaign." Still, he expressed doubt about the intentions of the government to make good on its tough words and urged his listeners to report to Borujerdi "any failure by police to take action against Bahai assemblies."³¹ Very quickly, however, it was realized that Alam had not actually committed the government to any of the clerical demands and, instead, his directive was

³⁰ *Kayhan*, 28 Ordibehesht, [May 19, 1955]; Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi*, p. 209; for more details see Safa'i, *Mazakerat-e Majles-e Shura-ye Melli* [Debates of the National Consultative Assembly], 11th Year, number 2992, Saturday 30 Ordibehesht 1334, pp. 1-3.

³¹ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 4: 567.

vague enough in its restrictions that it could be used against the Islamic movement. Borujerdi decided that Alam's offering was unacceptable.

On May 19, one of the mullah-deputies in the majles made it known that the Grand Ayatollah was not happy with government action thus far and that he demanded a bill that specifically named the Baha'is, identified them as illegal, and bound the government to dismiss them all from the army and the civil service. Borujerdi, he threatened, would introduce his own bill in the majles if the Shah and the Cabinet did not act quickly.³² The publications of the Islamic associations were also very vocal in their demands for more governmental action and continued to demand that action be taken against the Baha'is, who "should all be expelled from [Iran]."³³

In his May 19 radio broadcast, Falsafi spoke about the Baha'is for ten minutes. After first linking them to Tudeh, he called for them to be specifically named illegal, charged that several large areas of land were given as (tax-free) endowments to the Baha'is, and lamented that the Baha'is enjoy tax-free profitable land while some Muslim peasants are landless. He demanded that the government seize Baha'i property and distribute it to Muslim peasants. This call for ending endowments and engaging in land redistribution is fascinating, given that within four years of this call to action the Shah would himself begin a program of land reform that would call for the tax-free lands enjoyed by religious groups to be redistributed to peasants. Despite Falsafi's enthusiasm for this plan when it involved Baha'i land, he was somehow less than thrilled when this populism later targeted clerical interests.

³² Ibid., 573.

³³ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 3 / 55, Stevens to FO, May 19, 1955.

The Shah's government had no intention to give in to Borujerdi on anti-Baha'i legislation, but strong popular pressure prompted a revised compromise. According to Fearnley, the president of the majles informed him on May 19 that he had been acting as the intermediary between the Cabinet and Borujerdi's representatives in the majles to hammer out a new compromise "in order to calm down the present excitement in the majles and elsewhere." The pressure for resolution was intense because Falsafi was "still keeping the Government up to the mark in his sermons, and the deputy-mulla, Safa'i, in a pre-agenda speech in the majles two days ago, threatened to reintroduce his Bill for the outlawing of the Baha'is and the confiscation of their property unless the Government themselves took similar action soon." What was eventually produced was a plan that did not really satisfy either side, in which the government would permanently seize and rehabilitate the "more obvious Baha'i public properties" and remove from employment "the more outstanding and better-known Baha'is."³⁴

The first stage of this face-saving compromise involved the previously discussed destruction of the dome of the Baha'i National Center on May 22, the last day of Ramadan, under the joint supervision of Falsafi, General Bakhtiar, and Army Chief of Staff Batmanghelich, before a large crowd that had gathered to watch the spectacle. In the British view, "The government did not want to play into the hands of the mullas, but equally they did not dare to stand up to them too much...They made the gesture of destroying the dome of the Baha'i [Center] in Tehran but stalled on the question of anti-Baha'i legislation."³⁵ The British Ambassador saw the partial destruction of the national Baha'i center as proof of the hollowness of the Shah's early moves against the clergy.

³⁴ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 14 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Fearnley, May 21, 1955.

³⁵ Ibid., FO 371 / 114808 / EP 1015 / 3, Stevens to FO, July 6, 1955.

Although the Shah is going about saying that he intends to fight it out with the mullahs who are bidding for real power, the Government, no doubt under his instructions, continues to try and abate the storm by bowing to it. As a demonstration of virtuous intention they decided at the weekend to tear down the dome of the Bahai [Center] in Tehran...³⁶

The ongoing push for Baha'i dismissals

Borujerdi considered the destruction of the Baha'i dome to be too small a face-saving gesture to merit an end to anti-Baha'i efforts, and continued his push for anti-Baha'i legislation past the end of Ramadan and into the summer. In his final radio broadcast, Falsafi relayed Borujerdi's call for further legislation against the Baha'is, vowed to revive the issue in summer during Moharram, and urged an economic boycott of Baha'is in the interregnum between the holy months.³⁷

At the end of Ramadan, the Acting Prime Minister (Entezam) went to Qom for what was, according to *Ettela'at*, "confidential discussions" concerning the propaganda (*tablighat*) said to be coming from the Baha'is and the social convulsions (*tashannojat*) that had resulted thus far and may occur again. Borujerdi had solicited this meeting with the governmental leadership in order to see his counterparts face to face and "respectfully bring to their attention" the dangers posed by the Baha'is. Borujerdi met directly with Entezam for about thirty minutes and communicated the implicit threat that if the government did not do what was necessary against the Baha'is, this "intensified the likelihood of the outbreak (*boruz*) of more dangerous incidents." *Ettela'at*—expressing the government's opinion—downplayed this assessment and claimed that the

³⁶ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 21 / 55, Stevens to FO, May 26, 1955.

³⁷ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 4: 573.

aforementioned (ambiguous) declaration by Alam was sufficient to prevent further “unpleasant (*nagovar*) incidents.”³⁸

In this period, there were a series of clerical gatherings for “settling once and for all the Baha’i matter.” While ultimately inconclusive, these gatherings led to further pushes for legislation in conjunction with renewed public appeals for action. One such public appeal came in an open letter to the majles, published in *Neda-ye Haqq*, which urged the government to deal with the Baha’is just as it dealt with Tudeh sedition, i.e. they should be executed, as this would be in “the best interests of the nation.”³⁹

Alam continued to deflect all calls for further legislation by claiming that this was unnecessary, since Baha’i property could be seized under Articles 15 of the Supplemental Law, which said that religious law could supersede property rights as long as compensation was paid, and that Baha’is could be dismissed under Articles 20 and 21, which banned “heretical books and materials hurtful to the perspicuous religion” and “societies and gatherings which... give rise to religious or civil disorder and are... prejudicial to public order.”⁴⁰

Despite its promises to act under these laws, the government “has not applied any overt policy of discharging Bahais from government service.”⁴¹ The Cabinet did not initially have any serious plan to enact more than token dismissals of Baha’is, but Borujerdi’s continued intransigence on this issue during the summer became an ongoing concern and the Prime Minister eventually warned the Americans that the government might actually be forced to dismiss many Baha’i employees. There were persistent

³⁸ *Ettela’at*, 31 Ordibehesht 1334 [May 22, 1955].

³⁹ Tavakoli-Targhi, “Anti-Bahaism,” p. 219.

⁴⁰ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 18 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Fearnley, May 24, 1955.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

rumors of an imminent purge of Baha'is in the military, in which "several high ranking army officers who are Bahai [were] being retired or resigning;" there were also rumors of a "large-scale purge of Baha'i civil servants."⁴²

Anticipating Anglo-American displeasure with these dismissals, there was an attempt to spin them as unavoidable and even beneficial for the victims. Entezam informed the British that the planned dismissal of many Baha'is under existing laws (Articles 21 and 22) was actually a protective move and primarily aimed at blocking clerical calls for new and more explicit legislation and more thoroughgoing dismissals that "would make the position of the Bahais even more difficult."⁴³ He argued that a few Baha'is needed to be sacrificed to protect the rest, and "it would probably be necessary to remove a few leading Bahais from high places" but that, he hoped, "it would not go further than that."⁴⁴

Likewise, the Shah claimed that conceding to the demand to dismiss many Baha'is was almost unavoidable since, legally speaking, the Baha'is were not and have never been a constitutionally recognized group in Iran, and that as a result of this there were many vestigial anti-Baha'i laws on the books that made it very difficult to ignore clerical demands when they had the law on their side. As Alam put it, only Islam, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity legally exist, and formally "we recognize no other."⁴⁵

Even the doggedly anti-clerical Alam became convinced that there was a need for high-level dismissals of some Baha'is to allow the ulama to save face and cease pressing

⁴² USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 4: 581.

⁴³ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 21 / 55, Stevens to FO, May 26, 1955.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 20 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Stevens, May 25, 1955.

⁴⁵ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 327.

the issue. The Shah supported this call for show dismissals in the short term, saying that the goal was just to smooth things over until after the conclusion of Moharram (anti-Baha'i activists had earlier promised a second-wave of attacks during the holy month). Once this danger period passed, he would "take drastic action" against the clergy.

Explaining how the plan was to unfold, the Shah shared that he intended

to make some kind of communication, either a Government announcement or a letter to Borujerdi which the latter might publish, saying that Baha'i gatherings were being prohibited, that anyone who declared himself to be a Baha'i would not be allowed to hold a Government position and that there was, therefore, no further issue between the Government and the mullas. He went on to explain that it was perfectly open to Baha'is to declare themselves as Moslems since they regarded their church as an off shoot of Islam.⁴⁶

In other words, he was advocating a type of "don't ask, don't tell" policy in which the government would encourage silence or dissimulation and would only impose penalties on those who expressed a Baha'i orientation in a way that could not be overlooked. Alam claimed that only those "who made themselves prominent by not hiding their religion would be dismissed." The Shah's personal physician, General Ayadi, was put forward as an example of an "out" Baha'is who would be dismissed. In his view, "this man would definitely have to go."⁴⁷

Believing that mass dismissal of Baha'is was within reach, Borujerdi began to distance himself from the violence and disorder of Ramadan, and even from Falsafi, pretending that he had not given Falsafi the green light to begin a pogrom. To better position himself as a voice of calm, Borujerdi "is now backpedaling hard," to play to the perception that he was "different from the others" in that he could be reasoned with, and

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 18 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Fearnley, May 24, 1955.

was not a slave of passions.⁴⁸ Borujerdi believed that clerical interests could be pursued through legislation and was more than willing to try the political route when other options became untenable. The Shah was agitated by this attempt to force action in the majles, however, and believed that Iran's parliament was "a relatively insignificant body whose job it was to make laws and obey orders."⁴⁹

In the middle of June, with no agreement reached, mullah-deputies who spoke on Borujerdi's behalf again renewed calls for anti-Baha'i action. This led to a rebuke by the Speaker of the majles, which in turn led to angry press interviews by clerics and a series of heated communications between Borujerdi and the Shah. Several hundred clerics gathered in Tehran and passed a resolution calling for further anti-Baha'i legislation, while couching this defiance with praise and gratitude for all the efforts that the government had taken thus far against the Baha'is. Tensions were very heated, but according to American military reports the Shah and his cabinet were now "believed to be able and willing to deal firmly with Mullahs."⁵⁰

On June 15, Wright learned from Hamzavi that the Shah

had decided to parley with Borujerdi. The latter had insisted that he would only speak with Dr. Eqbal for whom Borujerdi claims to have a high respect, enhanced by his building of the mosque at the university. Dr. Eqbal, after a difficult conversation with Borujerdi, managed to reach a modus vivendi with him on the Baha'i business and, according to Hamzavi, seems reasonably satisfied that he will not cause trouble in the future. Hamzavi also reported that Falsafi had been bought off and would probably be leaving the country [during Moharram].⁵¹

⁴⁸ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 26 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Stevens, June 6, 1955.

⁴⁹ Ibid., FO 371 / 114810 / EP 1018 / 18, Stevens to FO, June 8, 1955.

⁵⁰ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 4: 590.

⁵¹ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 29 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Wright, June 15, 1955.

The Shiraz Massacre

The tenuous rapprochement with Borujerdi only exacerbated widespread clerical frustration with the nominal concessions that the Shah was offering and did not assuage skepticism of his willingness to follow through with dismissals. According to an American political report from June 24:

Uneasy peace prevails between the Government and the Mullahs, while the Government attempts to split leading Mullahs and Mullahs continue their barrage with letters and telegrams. A mullah deputation is to see the Shah next week with a renewed though moderately worded demand for the expulsion of Bahais from public service, the Shah is expected to do and say nothing in response.⁵²

It was in this context that Shiraz became the epicenter of clerical dissatisfaction on June 27, when Ayatollah Shirazi organized a further attack on the House of the Bab (the most important “Baha’i” holy site in Iran), which had been damaged in May and was occupied by security forces.⁵³ This attack was triggered when security forces attempted to repair some of the damage that had been done to the holy site. In light of Borujerdi’s recent settlement with the regime, these repairs were mistakenly seen as a prelude to returning the building to the Baha’is. In reality, the caretaker of the holy site had been forced to pay the cost of the repairs even though he was not even allowed access to the building, nor given any indication that it would be returned. When Shirazi learned of the commencement of repairs, he feared that the results of his first attack were about to be

⁵² USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 4: 597.

⁵³ It is actually a Babi holy site that is also holy to Baha’is. It had been under Baha’i control until it was seized in 1955, and was later returned to the Baha’is. It was demolished after the Revolution of 1979. Baha’is have very detailed plans for the building, however, and anticipate rebuilding the holy site after the fall of the Islamic Republic. They do not actively oppose the present regime, but see its fall as inevitable in light of Baha’u’llah’s prophecies concerning Iran’s future as a tolerant democracy (*The Kitab-i-Aqdas*, verses 91-93).

undone, and the property returned. He decided to quickly attack the holy site again, this time finishing the job so completely that it could not be repaired.⁵⁴

On June 27, Shirazi personally led a mob of about five hundred members of his Brotherhood party, and others, to the House of the Bab. The area's governor-general, Major General Seifollah Hemat, would later claim that Ayatollah Shirazi called him to request permission for this attack but that after he, of course, refused, the ayatollah did not accept this and continued to say that he would move forward with his plan, "even if I must lay down my life to do it."⁵⁵ It is doubtful that Shirazi actually asked for permission and it is more likely that the governor-general invented this phone call later, in order to make the case that he was not culpable since he had ordered Shirazi to abandon his plans. In any case, the mob was intercepted by security forces before it could destroy the Baha'i holy place.

According to the American Consul's interview with Governor-General Hemat, more than two weeks after the event, the security forces were cursed and pelted with bricks and a policeman and an army officer were supposedly knocked out. Hemat denied that there were any fatalities in the incident, or that any bullets were fired. Instead, he claimed that only rifle butts were used to beat back the crowd and that no deaths occurred.⁵⁶ His story, however, is contradictory, self-serving, and less reliable than earlier eyewitness accounts that discuss the use of live ammunition leading to fatalities.

The eyewitness accounts that contradict the governor-general's apologetic account were obtained two weeks earlier by the American Consul, less than three days

⁵⁴ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 337; FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 36 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Stevens, June 28, 1955.

⁵⁵ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 338.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 334-39.

after the riots, through Colonel Enayatollah Sohrab, a Point IV employee and the chairman of his community's Baha'i Local Spiritual Assembly. Sohrab is described as a "reliable source" and he collected and shared the eyewitness accounts that came to him immediately after the riot. According to these accounts, Shirazi advanced on the House of the Bab surrounded by an inner core of followers [from his Brotherhood Party]. Along the way, the group snowballed as it picked up a number of men, some of whom were supporters of the anti-Baha'i cause, while others were merely curious. The mob began to attack the holy site, but a police major tried to stop them, only to be pushed aside. The chief of police arrived and tried to placate the crowd by slapping and chastising the police major for disrespecting the Ayatollah. This only spurred the mob on, as it was taken as a sign of high-level police acquiescence. The crowd returned to demolishing the holy site, found its caretaker, and attempted to beat him, and a few Baha'is who tried to protect him, to death. The caretaker was beaten to the edge of death before he could be rescued and taken to a nearby hospital, where he was not expected to live. As the scene descended into chaotic violence, the army was finally called in by the exasperated police. Upon arrival, the army ordered the crowd to disperse. Shirazi's supporters did not leave, believing that the chief of police had indicated governmental acquiescence. When their orders were not followed, the army troops were ordered to shoot into the crowd. Four to six individuals were killed and fifty to sixty wounded in the massacre that followed, according to the earliest eyewitness reports. The army immediately dispersed the survivors, arresting many, and placing the city under martial law.⁵⁷

Rumors reached Tehran within hours of Baha'i-related clashes in Shiraz that had led to the imposition of martial law. The Cabinet denied all of the stories coming out of

⁵⁷ Ibid., 340-41.

Shiraz and cancelled a previously-scheduled press conference by Alam and Minister of War Hedayat in order to avoid being questioned about the events in Shiraz. The press was threatened and told not to publish anything about what had occurred in Shiraz except for the official line, which admitted that martial law was imposed but completely omitted all details relating to the massacre or that the agitation was over the Baha'i issue.

Representatives of the foreign press were also warned against reporting on what had really occurred in Shiraz. Only the Reuters correspondent did not stay silent in the face of government pressure. His report, although bold, was vague, second-hand, and did not touch on the massacre; merely pointing out that it was anti-Baha'i rioting that had led to the imposition of martial law. Within Iran, "News stories were brief, vague and sketchy, with no mention of the key anti-Bahai aspect of incident." The only editorializing occurred in *Farman*, which expressed confidence the "trouble makers" would be punished and regret that just as Iran began the path of reform the "activities of foreign and Iranian agents" worked to "provoke bloody incidents."⁵⁸ This article was allowed since its comments were couched in support of the government's reform program, it was vague, and the incident was, as always, attributed to nebulous foreign forces. After the immediate danger passed, several papers were allowed to bring up the anti-Baha'i nature of the Shiraz riots, although they of course did not mention the massacre and used the event as a pedagogical tool to condemn street mobs and instruct readers "that this is no way to defend Islam."⁵⁹

On the night of the riots and massacre, the Cabinet held an emergency meeting. Alam wanted to "crack down hard" on the Shiraz defiance—which had ruined a hard won

⁵⁸ Ibid., Reel 4: 603. Also, see the section on governmental censorship in Chapter VI.

⁵⁹ Ibid., Reel 1: 130.

compromise— by making an example out of Ayatollah Shirazi. He had the support of everyone but Prime Minister Ala, Dr. Amini, and Motamedi. The Shah was non-committal.⁶⁰ The cabinet met several times over the matter before reaching the opinion that, despite Alam’s desire to make an example of Shirazi, it was unwise to exile him permanently since, according to Shiraz deputies and the security chiefs, such a move would cement the “general hostility of mullahs.” Alam’s minority maintained that “mullahs will create far worse trouble later if government fails to crackdown now.” When it seemed possible that there might be no arrest at all, Alam again threatened to resign, saying that if Ayatollah Shirazi was not arrested then this would be a show of weakness that would make his job of ensuring security impossible. Alam’s mulishness resulted in the order for the Ayatollah to be brought to Tehran and detained without being formally charged. Shirazi refused to cooperate, but was taken forcefully on the Shah’s insistence. Alam rescinded his threat to resign and expressed satisfaction at the compromise since, despite the moderate nature of the punishment for Shirazi, he was pleased by “the fate of the many lower-ranked clergy under him who were arrested and sent away to suffer imprisonment and worse ‘in torrid southern areas.’”⁶¹

In a majles session in July, while Alam was again discussing the government’s policy of opposing all kinds of propaganda leading to disorder, the events in Shiraz led to outbursts during his speech. When he mentioned the government’s punishment of oppositional elements, Safa’i asked if this was now to the point “of punishing Muslims instead of Baha’is.” Alam said that this would never occur, but that the government forces would do what was necessary to maintain order. This was too much for Mir

⁶⁰ Ibid., 128-9; FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 36 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Stevens, June 28, 1955.

⁶¹ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 1: 128-29.

Ashrafi, who exclaimed: “Provided they do not shoot the [Muslim] people in front of the house of... the Bab!” Alam replied condescendingly, saying: “my dear sir, they have told you the wrong things.” Mir Ashrafi replied that the government’s denials “have not been convincing.” Alam dismissed this and said, “They have convinced the majority. You are in the [unconvinced] minority. Is that my fault?”⁶²

The Shiraz bazaar closed down completely for some time to protest the detention and exile of Shirazi. Some began to assume that Governor-General Hemat and General Azidi were themselves crypto-Baha’is, as they could conceive of no other explanation for why a crowd of Muslims led by the city’s most-revered ayatollah would be fired upon to protect a Baha’i site. Many bazaaris demanded not only the return of the ayatollah but also the removal of both the governor-general and the general responsible. Shirazi also demanded their dismissal when he was taken away to Tehran.⁶³

The Brotherhood Party

When Ayatollah Shirazi was taken away to Tehran as a prisoner, over three thousand people showed up to show their support. His supporters were mainly urbanized villagers, the unemployed urban poor, lower-class artisans, and shop owners. According to Governor-General Hemat, Shirazi’s supporters “for the most part,” belong to “the same people who...were used in the Tudeh or National Front demonstrations.”⁶⁴ His courting of this urban underclass was said to be motivated by a driving ambition to become the “next Kashani” as well as a “local hero.”⁶⁵ The 1955 attacks were not Shirazi’s first

⁶² *Ettela’at*, 22 Tir 1334 [July 14, 1955]; Akhavi, *Religion and Politics*, pp. 85-87.

⁶³ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 341.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 335.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 338.

political “gambit” involving minorities. He had earlier gained notoriety by inciting anti-Jewish riots in 1944.⁶⁶

Shirazi was generally recognized as the senior cleric in Shiraz. He was very politically engaged in this period and in Shiraz especially “he is extremely strong in his position” and, unchallenged locally because he is the “richest in qualifications and experience.”⁶⁷ The main source of Shirazi’s influence and authority was not his position in the clerical hierarchy or his popular support in the bazaari classes, but rather his authority and influence as the founder and leader of the Brotherhood Party, also known as the Society of Islamic Brothers (*Jam’iyat-e-Baradaran-e-Islami*). This organization, which has been discussed in Chapter II, gained popularity after the abdication of Reza Shah and, according to General Azidi, was organized and consciously modeled on the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.⁶⁸ The Brothers were a tightly-disciplined, well-organized politico-religious group that displayed extreme loyalty to Shirazi in the same way that the early Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt was intensely personally loyal to Hassan al-Banna.

The Brotherhood Party boasted thirty thousand members—although the British believed ten thousand was more accurate—all of whom were personally loyal to Shirazi and were said to be prepared to fight and die for him. The Brotherhood was recognized as the most powerful party in Iran at the time, especially in terms of party loyalty and discipline. Supporters of the Brothers included the Speaker of the majles, all the majles deputies from the Fars province, and Tehran’s *imam jom’eh* (state-appointed leader of Friday prayers), Dr. Emami. Although the clerical hierarchy could not protect Shirazi,

⁶⁶ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 39 / 55. Confidential Minutes by Fearnley, July 5, 1955.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, attachment to Confidential Minutes, entitled “Sayed Nur-ud-Din of Shiraz.”

⁶⁸ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 338; FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 39 / 55, attachment to Confidential Minutes.

his party was able to do what Borujerdi could not. The Speaker of the majles and deputies loyal to the Brotherhood lobbied for his release, as did his close friend Dr. Emami and those like Prime Minister Ala who did not want to have to deal with the repercussions of angering the Brotherhood. As a result, although Shirazi was detained in Tehran, the government “could not touch him” and when he arrived he was met by several majles deputies and served his “detention” as the pampered guest of the Speaker of the majles, Sardar Fakher Hekmat.⁶⁹

The Speaker and other allies of Shirazi pressured the government to abandon the plan to keep him detained in Tehran until after the end of Moharram. It was argued that in order for Shiraz not to fall into rioting again, Shirazi needed to be on the ground since, without him, his Brotherhood would act on their own, without direction or a single head, and this would lead to widespread violence. Shirazi’s advocates vouched for his ability to restrain and discipline his followers and the British also approved of this change of plan.⁷⁰

As a result of the pressure brought to bear by the Brothers, Shirazi made his triumphant return “in all his glory” a month early, on August 11, and was met by a crowd of at least two thousand. Embarrassed by this hero’s welcome, the Shah assured the British that the reported crowd was not a sign of the cleric’s popularity, but was instead merely composed of members of his party who were obliged to be there. (The Shah did not realize that a group of thousands compelled by strong party discipline was a more serious threat than the popularity of an individual). Despite the Shah’s claim that the ardor of the crowd was insincere, according to a British eyewitness account the crowd

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 49 / 55, Confidential Minute by Fearnley, September 1, 1955.

that arrived to meet Shirazi at the airport was jubilant and “in a fanatical mood,” such that it could only be safely observed from the safety of a nearby rooftop.⁷¹ Sheep were slaughtered before the plane as “the Imam” exited it and led an exuberant procession through the city, in a scene that could very easily be seen as a foreshadowing of Khomeini’s triumphal return to Iran twenty-four years later.

When Shirazi was forcefully taken away in June, he had claimed from this position of apparent weakness that he would refuse to return to the city until Governor-General Hemat was removed. After his hero’s return, Shirazi gloated in his Friday sermon over both the early end of his detention and his success in having the governor-general removed.⁷² It appears that, in exchange for his early release and the removal of Governor-General Hemat and General Azidi, Shirazi agreed not to engage in revenge attacks against the Baha’is and to lend his Brotherhood organization to assist in the crackdown against the Qashqai tribes.

The British regretted the removal of Governor-General Hemat since, although “he is not a strong character,” he was “a decent man.”⁷³ The governor-general’s removal was almost unavoidable because of the widespread belief that he was actually a secret Baha’i and that this was the reason why he had allowed the massacre. Although it was common in Iran to accuse political enemies of secret Baha’ism, in this case the accusation carried more weight “due to the fact that at one period of his life he was a member of the Baha’i

⁷¹ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 42 / 55, Dispatch No. 1, Aug 15, 1955.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 49 / 55, Confidential Minute by Fearnley, September 1, 1955.

movement.”⁷⁴ As a result, there was no way to shield him and he was removed from the governorship and assigned to direct the resettling of the Qashqai tribes.⁷⁵

When the Reuters correspondent in Iran (Buist) met with Ayatollah Shirazi in early July, the Imam was very angry and remonstrated with him, attempting to convince the foreign press to take his side in the Baha’i matter. When he asked Buist about public opinion abroad, he was surprised to hear that “the impression was bad, intolerance and persecution being odious to the British public.” Hearing this, Shirazi got angry and was “much put out.” Buist, in turn, was very unimpressed by this “slippery person” who in his “tirade” made a point to link the British and the Baha’is and to stress that their senior local employees were always Baha’is. Shirazi also expressed his anger at the Iranian government for obstructing the push against the Baha’is, and said that he would accept from them “nothing less than the outlawing of the Baha’is and the confiscation of their property.” In his opinion, “matters could not be left as they were.” If the government did not at least do this much, then he “would consider leaving the country for a real sanctuary for Islam.”⁷⁶

A “satisfactory agreement”

During a June 28 conversation with the British ambassador, the Shah put on a brave face regarding the events in Shiraz and said that Ayatollah Shirazi had been brought to Tehran, but was evasive about whether or not he would be formally arrested and seemed to not really know what to do with the Ayatollah. He also seemed unsure if Shirazi was still being utilized by the British and was relieved to hear that this was no longer the case.

⁷⁴ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 42 / 55, Dispatch No. 1, August 15, 1955.

⁷⁵ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 3:112.

⁷⁶ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 37 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Burrows, July 7, 1955.

Looking ahead, he stressed that, in the aftermath of Shiraz, the provincial leadership had been empowered to act against the clerics without needing to seek approval from Tehran first, in order to forestall further miscommunications and hesitancy, as had been the case in the Shiraz disaster. He pointed out that General Bakhtiar was already arresting ayatollahs on his own initiative and described this autonomy in the security regime as a positive development. Turning to Borujerdi and the larger Baha'i issues, the Shah seemed pleased with the negotiations and reported that the Prime Minister had personally seen the Grand Ayatollah and that Borujerdi had promised to give up on his demands for legislation explicitly excluding Baha'is from government employment. The Shah explained his strategy vis-à-vis Borujerdi by claiming that he was planning an anti-clerical campaign, but that this required careful preparation as he did not want "to go off at half cock" since "once an operation against the mullahs started it would have to be carried out all the way."⁷⁷

This shift in attitude towards his former political base is also evident in a summer speech in which the Shah went off-script while addressing landlords and other members of the traditional elite. In an emotional rant that contemporaries thought might be symptomatic of a minor mental breakdown, he warned that the traditional and "backwards" classes would be "crushed like dry sticks beneath the wheels of progress."⁷⁸

Despite earlier progress with Borujerdi, the confrontation in Shiraz revived tensions and caused a renewed push for anti-Baha'i action during Moharram. Borujerdi made it clear that, in light of mounting pressure from below, the situation was "getting beyond his control and that mullahs insist upon expropriation of Bahai property and

⁷⁷ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 37 / 55, Secret Minutes by Stevens, June 29, 1955.

⁷⁸ NACPM, RG 469 / 250 / 81 / 14 / 2-7 / Box 19 / Folder 350 Political, "Iran Political Summary – July 1955."

dismissal of Bahais from government services.”⁷⁹ He claimed that clerical resentment of the government’s “inaction on the Bahai question was now beyond his control, and that he threatens to leave Iran unless the government takes up the anti-Bahai measures as proposed by the Mullahs.”⁸⁰

Like his mentor, Grand Ayatollah Ha’eri-Yazdi, Borujerdi considered voting with his feet by leaving Iran for Iraq to be his ultimate trump card. He had already made this threat in May to no result, but, unable to get his followers to accept the weak compromise that he had worked out, especially in light of the events in Shiraz, he had few other options besides returning to this threat, which he considered to be his trump card. Unfortunately for Borujerdi, British and American pressure for “firmness” against the clergy were considered more important than the problems that would be caused by Borujerdi quitting Iran, and concerns about meeting the “test” of Moharram to Western satisfaction far outweighed anxiety about the collapse of relations with Borujerdi.⁸¹

American observers felt that “with [lower level] Mullahs angry” and unwilling to acquiesce to Borujerdi’s compromise, the likeliness of renewed violence during Moharram had “become more ominous.”⁸² Security forces spent the summer targeting various “small-fry mullahs” who acted as rogue elements and refused to fall in line and accept Borujerdi’s terms for cessation. These combatant clerics had essentially given up on the possibility of working through the majles, where ulama-backed bills were constantly being blocked and the deputies introducing them rebuked.⁸³ While Borujerdi

⁷⁹ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 1: 128.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, Reel 4: 602.

⁸¹ See Chapter VII.

⁸² USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 4: 602.

⁸³ NACPM, RG 469 / 250 / 81 / 14 / 2-7 / Box 19 / folder 350 – political, Iran Political Summary – June 1 to June 30, 1955, July 12, 1955.

was trying to work within the system, such as it was, those who broke away from his authority had lost faith in the viability of a diplomatic approach.

The Shah's government, although not budging on clerical demands for legislation, again expressed a willingness to possibly compromise on the call for significant dismissals of Baha'is. On July 14, Alam again addressed the majles on the Baha'i issue and said that the government would act firmly against the Baha'is under the existing laws and would "deal with" the presence of Baha'is in government employment by utilizing thirty-year-old statutes that call for the dismissal of any employee engaged in propaganda against the "official religion."⁸⁴ That is to say, clerical calls for the religion to be explicitly named and banned were rejected yet again, as were calls for wholesale dismissals and demands that Baha'i identity alone should warrant dismissal, rather than "propaganda against the state religion," which was really a euphemism for an "out" Baha'i identity. This performance by Alam was largely a repeat of his earlier address, tough but non-binding words in concert with ambiguous directives that did not really commit the government to anything. It was a reification of the Shah's aforementioned belief that a "don't ask, don't tell" approach to Baha'ism was desirable.

Borujerdi had been promised more by Alam, and was expecting more explicit measures to be outlined in the majles speech, but Alam ran this original plan by the British at the last minute and, based on their firm rejection, he backpedaled and again failed to deliver on his promises to the Grand Ayatollah. In a July 13 meeting, Alam told Wright that a "satisfactory agreement" had been reached with Borujerdi over the Baha'i question. Falsafi would be sent out of the country until after Moharram on the pretext of a pilgrimage and a compromise deal was to be made public through a staged event in the

⁸⁴ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 4: 621.

majles. First, there was to be an exchange of public letters, followed by a pre-arranged questioning on the Baha'i issue in the majles, after which the government's spokesman (Alam) would respond by saying that the existing legislation was enough to prevent Baha'i propaganda and gatherings, and that the government would employ only Muslims in government service. That is to say, it would promise to dismiss all Baha'is. Alam told Wright that he liked the plan, but wanted to get British feedback before settling the matter with Borujerdi.⁸⁵

Wright made his disapproval clear and said that the government had to maintain a "firm line" and could not engage in any concessions that "looked like weakness." He further warned that any concessions would be criticized outside of Iran and publicized by the international press to the detriment of Iran. He asked Alam if the government really intended to dismiss Baha'i employees, or if the spectacle in the majles and the face-saving compromise were just hollow words designed to placate Borujerdi in the short-term to get past the Moharram danger. Alam said that the promise to dismiss all Baha'is would be mostly rhetoric, although he expected that they would have to "dismiss some prominent Baha'is." He added that, despite the public show, dismissals would not actually be wholesale, but limited and select, and even those unfortunate individuals who were dismissed as part of this token action would have the opportunity to dissimulate if they wished to maintain their employment.⁸⁶

Wright replied that even an unenforced threat of full dismissals would still be unacceptable "weakness," since if there had not been any "recent mulla agitation" then no one would have lost their job. In Wright's view, even a single dismissal would amount to

⁸⁵ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 40 / 55, Wright, "The Bahais," July 13, 1955.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

a “reward” for clerical intrigues. When Alam heard this, he got worried. Although he did not tell Wright, he had already made a firm commitment to Borujerdi to publically call for full dismissals, assuming that this would be acceptable to the Powers as long as it was a hollow promise with nominal action.

Faced with Wright’s displeasure, Alam said that the government could be tougher and that the final speech for the majles could still be changed to meet Wright’s preferences by phrasing mentions of the Baha’is “diplomatically,” so as to “leave the Government free to act as they thought best” by not explicitly agreeing to anything. Alam offered to give Wright his new script, based on Wright’s modifications, but Wright said that he should not be physically given the text of the final speech since “this was an internal affair on which the Persians must act on their accord.” Alam offered that, instead of dealing with Borujerdi, perhaps the government should break with him entirely, since that was the only other option besides making some sort of further public gesture in exchange for Borujerdi’s cooperation. He said that the government was willing to do this if needed. Wright was savvy enough, however, to see the offer to completely break with Borujerdi as “brave words” and “completely empty,” since Wright knew that Alam did not have the support of the Cabinet. In his view, “it is quite clear... that a weak compromise is all but through with Borujerdi, and that Baha’is will be sacrificed to the mullahs.” Wright talked to his Baha’i contacts about the possibility of those caught in the nominal dismissals escaping through dissimulation, but was told flatly that “no self-respecting Baha’i would dream of declaring himself a Moslem.”⁸⁷

Although Alam’s final majles performance was not what he had promised Borujerdi, he supplemented it with the scattered use of a questionnaire to verify the

⁸⁷ Ibid.

religious identity of governmental employees (circular no. 7682). When individuals wrote “Baha’i,” nothing usually happened and the forms were generally “misfiled,” even though they could occasionally conveniently re-emerge—sometimes years later—in order to deny pensions, or fire individuals (due to office politics, budget issues, local politics, and a variety of other issues).⁸⁸

Alam’s vague support for dismissals was used as the tangible “victory” which Borujerdi could use to end his pressure on the Baha’i matter. According to government sources, “this action will meet the minimum demand of the religious leader Borujerdi and will free the government to deal roughly with minor Mullahs [not falling in line with him] and preserve order during the Moharram holidays.”⁸⁹ In other words, Borujerdi essentially agreed not to take action during Moharram—and to turn a blind eye to when the government would “deal roughly” with rogue clerics who did not emulate him—in exchange for the non-binding promise to dismiss at least some of the more committed Baha’is from the army and civil service.⁹⁰

The Baha’is, unaware of the exaggerated nature of the threat of dismissals, were planning to affirm their Baha’i identity en masse and be dismissed, and plans were made to provide support for the large numbers of co-religionists expected to lose their jobs.⁹¹ The mass dismissal never came, however, although there were many scattered dismissals, the intensity of which depended on one’s location and occupation. In a July 31 conversation, Prime Minister Ala defended these inconsistent dismissals by claiming that

⁸⁸ NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 21 / 01 / Box 15 / Folder 570.3 Religion, Wiley to Holmes, June 14, 1961; Holmes to Wiley, June 21, 1961; and related enclosures.

⁸⁹ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 4: 621.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 20 / 03-06 / Box 7 / Folder 350, Iran Political Summary – July 1955, August 9, 1955.

Baha'is "often practice dissimulation" and that closeted Baha'is would therefore be unaffected by a partial purge.⁹²

What was being publicly presented as an enthusiastic dismissal of all Baha'is was, in reality, more akin to a "don't ask, don't tell" policy for positions in the military and the civil service, with active state encouragement of the closeting of Baha'i identity. In a sense, the official form recording religious identity was "asking," but the answer was generally "misfiled" and Baha'is remained employed unless they were "out" or "outed" in a way that could not be ignored. Baha'is in governmental employment, like gays in the military, became an open secret that was officially ignored as long as there was no public or ostentatious display of this othered identity that was believed to threaten the corporate whole.

Hormuzak (Yazd)

Almost a month after the deaths of about six Muslims in the Shiraz Massacre, about the same number of Baha'is were slaughtered in the small, rural village of Hormuzak, in the vicinity of Yazd. In contemporary accounts and later Baha'i literature, the slaughter of the Baha'is in Hormuzak is dealt with almost exclusively as a "savage" "eruption" of century-old Muslim hatred for Baha'is, divorced of political context. Chapter VI explores some of the Orientalist underpinnings of these markings of "Muslim" violence.

Hormuzak was a rural hamlet about one hundred and twenty kilometers south of Yazd. The Baha'is in the town were farmers and only consisted of six families. For several months before the July 28 massacre, they were harassed by other residents of the town, as well as by others from nearby larger villages, like Sakhvid. This pattern of

⁹² Ibid.

abuse began when irrigation water was diverted from Baha'i fields and continued with other forms of abuse, such as the refusal to admit Baha'is to the public bath, and threatening them with a "general massacre" later that year.⁹³

The gendarmerie intervened but, instead of helping, the troops occupied the best Baha'i residence, sending its inhabitants to live in the cellar. They looted this house as well as the other Baha'i residences and stored all of the collected valuables in the house that they occupied. This was considered insufficient recompense, however, and the Baha'is were told that they must pay a thousand *tomans* each as protection money. This was an impossible figure for poor rural farmers, who were only able to gather together a few hundred tomans between them.⁹⁴

On the night of July 28, a mob of villagers and others gathered to attack the Baha'is of Hormuzak. According to some accounts, there were two thousand assailants, but the true number was likely several hundred at most, given the small populations of the villages involved, the efficiency of the operation, and the apparent ability to catch some of the victims by surprise. The mob initially set fire to Baha'i houses and threw stones at the doors and windows, in order to get those inside the houses to run outside, into an ambush. The first to die was a Baha'i woman who opened her door in response to the calls from outside only to be immediately beaten to death with sticks and iron maces. Her husband was then pulled out of the house, over his dying wife, and beaten by the same crude weapons until he died. This pattern of luring individuals outside before killing them was repeated at several houses. The attacks sought to mutilate as well as kill. Some victims were first beaten and cut before being covered in petrol and burnt to

⁹³ Moojan Momen, ed., *The Seven Martyrs of Hormuzak* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1981), pp. 3-5.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

death. One unfortunate woman had her hands and head sliced open as she attempted to fight off her assailants, was covered in petrol, and was to be burnt alive, but was saved by defective matches and left to die from her other injuries.⁹⁵

Despite the repeated use of “mob” to describe the attackers, the attacks were by no means spontaneous or the result of a euphoric group-mind. The attacks were precise, telegraphed well in advance, systematic, and almost mechanical. After the initial attacks, the assailants made three passes over the area to hunt for survivors and were similarly deliberate in their looting of what little the gendarmerie had not already taken from Baha’i homes. Despite the “looting,” there was little left to take and there was no strong economic motive for the attacks, unlike many other incidents of anti-Baha’i violence where economic motives were rather naked. The lack of economic motivation can also be seen in the manner in which livestock and other animals were not taken as plunder but were instead killed and their carcasses left to rot. Simple execution was also not the primary intent. Apart from the initial victims, who were quickly disposed of to press the advantage of surprise, the later deaths involved deliberate mutilations intended to send a message. Aside from being burnt, victims were “hacked to pieces” with a cleaver and some were set on fire while still alive. It was not only the human victims that were mutilated; the bees belonging to the Baha’is were also burned and their donkeys mutilated. Their buildings were not just looted but also burned and completely destroyed as a symbolic expulsion of the Baha’i presence. Hormuzak was staged more as spectacle than slaughter, with the assailants who engaging in the performance carrying “trumpets, flags, and drums.”⁹⁶

⁹⁵ Ibid., pp. 30-36.

⁹⁶ Ibid., pp. 30-49, 60.

Initially, the government attempted to suppress news of the Hormuzak massacre and, as late as July 31, the Prime Minister was denying that any such incident had taken place.⁹⁷ The story was documented and publicized internationally by the Baha'i lobby, however, and after this the Iranian government felt compelled to persecute some of the assailants due to intense British and American pressure as well as embarrassment over the harm that this episode did to Iran's "great tradition of culture and tolerance."⁹⁸

The events in Hormuzak were in clear violation of the government's deal with Borujerdi to prevent further embarrassing episodes of anti-Baha'i violence. This violence, in spite of Borujerdi's promises, was taken by the Shah as further evidence supporting Alam's insistence on harsher actions against the clergy. The prosecution of those responsible for the Hormuzak massacre was carried out to send a clear message to Borujerdi, and armored cars with fifty troops from the Isfahan gendarmerie were sent in to restore order and arrest the instigators.⁹⁹

In an August 9 letter to the State Department, Horace Holley (writing for the governing body of the American Baha'i community) suggests that the Hormuzak attacks were organized and orchestrated by the Feda'iyān-e Islam. He mentions that, contemporaneous with the Hormuzak attacks, in the village of Shahreza, Hasan Javid was beaten in the center of town by a mob, wielding clubs and canes, which a single Feda'i was able to put together. Likewise, in the same village two other Baha'is were attacked by mobs under the inspiration of the Feda'iyān-e Islam, with the support of sympathetic local officials.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 182.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 168.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 182. For details on the resulting trial, see Chapter VII.

¹⁰⁰ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 1: 220.

The Feda'iyān-e Islam explanation for the massacre in Hormuzak seems plausible, since the attacks were organized and seemed to be directed by experienced individuals. Although most of the clerical hierarchy under Borujerdi was following his lead and avoiding direct confrontation, the Feda'iyān did not emulate Borujerdi and, in the face of governmental betrayal and anti-Muslim violence, it was well within their modus operandi to sponsor retributive attacks. Indeed, in November, mere months after the village violence, the Feda'iyān attempted to assassinate Prime Minister Ala. This fateful attack on Ala, and the government's severe response—which destroyed the movement—has been explained in the existing literature in the context of the Baghdad Pact. It is my position that this, and many other developments around 1955 that have been traditionally explained by invoking the Baghdad Pact can be explained equally well, if not more satisfactorily, by referring to the aborted anti-Baha'i pogrom and the anti-clerical campaign that followed (treated in Chapter VII).

Conclusion

As the August beginning of Moharram drew closer, Wright describes a situation in which “Borujerdi certainly seems to have been brought more or less into line,” a development that deflated those loyal to him. The remaining danger “now lies in the attitude of some of the other mullas” who might possibly go rogue and take action in spite of Borujerdi's agreement to stay quiet in exchange for some Baha'i dismissals.¹⁰¹ Nevertheless, General Bakhtiar confidently stated that “The Baha'i problem is now completely finished. Now that we have Borujerdi on our side, we can deal energetically and roughly with any local

¹⁰¹ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 114811 / EP 1018 / 35, Wright to FO, August 3, 1955.

mullah agitators.”¹⁰² The Shah had made it clear to Borujerdi that he “would not retreat another inch” and the Grand Ayatollah had been forced to accept the gesture of partial dismissals, even though none of his specific demands were met.¹⁰³ It was widely anticipated that Borujerdi would honor his end of the compromise, but there was also a great deal of anxiety that the Grand Ayatollah lacked the symbolic weight needed to suppress clerical dissent.

Borujerdi had employed every traditional tool at his command, even repeatedly threatening to quit Iran, only to achieve nominal results that included none of his stated goals and failed to satisfy those who considered him their leader. Even if the government actually delivered on its side of the agreement, this was still considered unacceptable by those actively engaged in the anti-Baha’i struggle, who were disappointed and disillusioned by Borujerdi’s failure, even though they generally remained loyal to him. One such Borujerdi loyalist, Hojjat al-Islam Mohammad Taqi Sebt-e Ashtiani, claimed that although “the Shah knows very well what a debt he owes to the clergy for their firm support on the 28th of Mordad [the 1953 coup],” when it came to repaying this debt with regard to the Baha’i issue, the Shah made a long string of promises only to break them all. In so doing, in the view of the Hojjat al-Islam, Borujerdi has been “made to lose face” and has “been made to look ridiculous.”¹⁰⁴

This anger was exacerbated by the government’s failure to enforce even this weak gesture.¹⁰⁵ After the danger of renewed violence in Moharram had passed without

¹⁰² NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 20 / 03-06 / Box 8 / Folder 350 – Memos of Conversation, General Bakhtiar, July 18, 1955.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 2: 141.

¹⁰⁵ There was also a great deal of anger at the Soraya’s continued “irreligious” behavior. Shortly before Moharram, Soraya left Iran for Europe, where she stayed until October. Her departure was motivated, in part, by her souring relations with the Shah. It was rumored that “the Queen has left Iran and the Shah for

incident, Alam privately discussed the issue of dismissals, saying that although there "would probably have to be some," the government "was really doing virtually nothing about it at present," and that the majles had now abandoned the issue. As a result, Borujerdi "is upset that nothing seems to be happening," despite the fact that "the Government committed itself to him personally." Alam further clarified that the government did not care about or check what Baha'is wrote on their religious identity forms and it was only those who insisted on firmly pushing their Baha'i identity who would likely be removed.¹⁰⁶ Over time, the hollow nature of the promises to dismiss known Baha'is became obvious, and the continued employment, and even later promotions, of Dr. Ayadi (the openly Baha'i personal physician of the Shah) became the most famous example of the continued employment of Baha'is in influential positions. A 1959 American report, for example, explains the decision not to intervene—after some Baha'is were dismissed—by noting that such cases were the exception, while in most cases the Iranian government "misfiled" religious identity forms where Baha'is honestly identified their religion.¹⁰⁷

In contrast to Borujerdi's failure to achieve any of his goals, Ayatollah Shirazi achieved relative success. Although his attempts to destroy the House of the Bab were blocked, and the property was eventually restored to the Baha'is, he was successful in

good," and this was supported by reports that she had taken her furs and jewels with her, just as the Shah's first wife had done when she left him. In apparent rebellion against being lectured to about her behavior in Miami, Soraya had "a grand, if somewhat unregal time" in Europe, "water skiing enthusiastically, sunning herself in abbreviated swimming suits, wining and dining and night clubbing without much restraint." All of this was done in public during the holy month of Moharram, when even music was frowned upon in conservative areas of Iran. This behavior abroad, months after her scandal in Miami, caused widespread disapproval and was said to "wound the patriotism of many Iranians." After this "rest," Soraya returned to the Shah (Ibid., Reel 6: 6-8, 31).

¹⁰⁶ NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 20 / 03-06 / Box 8 / Folder 350: Memos of Conversation, A. Alam, September 14, 1955.

¹⁰⁷ NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 21 / 01 / Box 15 / Folder 570.3 Religion, Bowling to Rockwell, June 15, 1961; Wiley to Holmes, June 14, 1961; Holmes to Wiley, June 21, 1961; and related enclosures.

other areas. Despite being targeted by Alam—with British backing—Shirazi was able to use his party to not only protect himself, but also to force his early release from “imprisonment,” as well as the dismissal of the general and governor-general who had opposed his mob action, just as he had promised to achieve while being taken away. While Borujerdi’s call for a boycott of Baha’is never really gained traction, the Brotherhood was able to shut down Shiraz for days to protest the detention of its leader. While Borujerdi’s representatives in the majles were routinely rebuked and made no progress, Shirazi’s representatives were more connected, more efficient, and ultimately more successful in their lobbying efforts on behalf of the Party’s leader. While Borujerdi was unable to prevent the rogue actions of his subordinates, Shirazi demanded and received the full loyalty of the Brothers. The Feda’iyan-e Islam also acted autonomously from Borujerdi and was able to achieve measured success in its anti-Baha’i efforts through its organizational strength and tangible focus on direct violence.

More than just damaging Borujerdi’s prestige, the relative successes of rogue efforts, in open defiance of the regime, suggested that the time for Borujerdi’s patient diplomacy and loyal opposition may have passed. At the same time, they provided a cautionary tale about the limits of feasible opposition. Neither the Brotherhood nor the Feda’iyan-e Islam survived very long after the events of 1955. The Brotherhood fell apart and was absorbed into other groups following Shirazi’s suspicious death in February 1957.¹⁰⁸ The Feda’iyan likewise dissipated following the execution of Safavi after his organization’s aforementioned botched attempt to assassinate Ala late in 1955. The lessons learned by these efforts were incorporated into the post-Borujerdi oppositional landscape discussed in Chapter VIII.

¹⁰⁸ Jafarian, *Jaryanha va Sazmanha-ye Mazhabi-Siasi-e Iran*, pp. 123-24.

CHAPTER VI

“A Wave of Emotional Feeling”: Staging the 1955 Pogrom

Introduction

This chapter explores conflicting contemporary attempts to obscure or explain the anti-Baha'i pogrom of 1955 in order to promote or defend the particular interests of the various actors involved in the episode. I propose that these contemporary attempts to “spin” the pogrom provide valuable insight into the anxieties and assumptions shaping the worldviews of the various sides, and reveal a tangle of intersecting authority claims, aimed at different audiences, and operating according to different grammars. Unlike the previous chapters, which explored the details of the pogrom and how the Shah and the Cabinet sought to negotiate the interstices after being caught between the irreconcilable demands of the traditional elite and the West, the present chapter is not concerned with historicity, but discourse and perception.

I begin by exploring how the pogrom has been staged in the clerical discourse of the period, particularly in the memoirs of the campaign's titular leader, Mohammad Taqi Falsafi, and in the correspondence of Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi. I then interrogate British and American archival sources and their positivist inscription of Orientalist categories on this “Muslim”-marked violence. This is followed by a discussion of the

representation of the pogrom in the lobbying efforts of American Baha'is. I conclude with an exploration of the Iranian government's attempts at censorship and obfuscation.

The Clerical Discourse

Falsafi's memoirs

In spite of his central role in 1955's anti-Baha'i pogrom, Falsafi's memoirs of the episode are written almost as if he was not there. His curt narration is especially elliptic when it comes to the Shah's reversal on the Baha'i issue, which nearly led Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi to quit Iran. Despite being the chief provocateur in Tehran, and deeply involved in all aspects of the pogrom and its aftermath, Falsafi claims: "About this, I do not remember a thing."¹ This selective amnesia is symptomatic of the problems that the pogrom poses to clerical meta-narratives of Pahlavi Iran. This issue is taken up in later chapters.

The disjointed nature of Falsafi's narrative occurs because of an unsuccessful attempt at reconciling conflicting clerical narratives, namely the post-revolutionary discourse, which formed the creative milieu in which the memoir was written, and the contemporary clerical rationale used in the Borujerdi period to justify the pogrom. The first narrative involves the post-Revolutionary ascription of supposed Baha'i privilege and ascendancy under the Pahlavis. This discourse relies heavily upon the partially fabricated memoirs of General Fardust.² This source is used to frame the Shah's personal

¹ Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi*, p. 210.

² General Fardust was a close friend of the Shah who, after the Revolution, was apparently coerced into denouncing the Pahlavi regime and offering insider "evidence" confirming Khomeinist myths, including

physician, Dr. Ayadi, as the “true sovereign” of Iran, a Machiavellian figure leading a secret Baha’i cabal ruling Iran and insidiously placing Baha’is in positions of power throughout the country.

In this view of the Pahlavi period, Iran lacked agency prior to the Revolution because its leadership allowed it to not only become the plaything of external powers, such as the British, but to also be exploited internally by the Baha’is, who were cast as “the Fifth Column of the foreigners in Iran.”³ General Ayadi—as the most prominent Baha’i at Court—is painted as the face of the regime’s corruption, with the Shah essentially relegated to a stooge. In this imagined schema, Dr. Ayadi is the Rasputin of the Court. According to the words attributed to Fardust, Ayadi was “the most influential individual in the royal court, and gradually became the most influential person in the country.”⁴ In this way, he eventually became Iran’s “King without Crown or Throne” (*sultan bedun-e taj va takht*).⁵ His authority as the chief medical officer of the armed forces was overstated and spun into nefarious control over the nation’s vital medicines and, therefore, control over the life and death of the nation’s sick and innocent. His various duties and positions were extrapolated and embellished to the point where he was said to have nearly a hundred senior-level jobs simultaneously, as well as vast control over hiring and appointments, and the ability to remove anyone who did not kowtow to his authority. He supposedly used this tentacular influence to insure that everything from

British control of Mossadeq, Jewish control of America, and Baha’i control of Pahlavi Iran. The general died shortly after these coerced confessions, and a work purported to be his memoirs appeared three years later, expanding upon this fantastical staging of the previous regime. See Ervand Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantations in Modern Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), pp.159 -61.

³ Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi*, p. 209.

⁴ Hossein Fardust, *Zohur va Soqut-e Saltanat-e Pahlavi* (Tehran: Ettela’at Publishing, 1990), p. 202.

⁵ Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi*, p. 195.

pharmacy stock to fisheries was “continually manipulated for the benefit of Baha’ism.”⁶

In this construct,

Ayadi was the true sovereign (*sultan-e vaq’i*) of Iran... During Ayadi’s sovereignty (*hakemiyat*) Baha’is were placed in important positions and there was no such thing as an unemployed Baha’i. In the time of Ayadi’s power (*qodrat*), the number of Iranian Baha’is tripled.⁷

Falsafi uses statements such as this as support for his claim that, shortly before the pogrom, Baha’is controlled Iran. Moreover, he claims that this was part of a larger colonial conspiracy involving the Zionist movement. In his view, Zionism and Baha’ism are “explicitly related, both serving as the slaves and bondsmen of America.” They were considered to be working towards a common goal, since “the English have made putting Palestine into the hands of the Jews the focus of Zionism and, likewise, America has made delivering Iran into the hands of individuals like Dr. Ayadi the focus of the Baha’is, so that in the Middle East there would be two bases (for the West).”⁸

This is a patently post-Revolutionary re-imagining of the context of the pogrom and the significance of Ayadi. In his actual speeches during the pogrom, Falsafi only briefly brought up Ayadi, through statements such as: “Our country has so many Muslim doctors, and as such the people are upset that a Baha’i individual is the personal physician of the Shah. You need to replace him.”⁹ The central issue was removing Baha’is from governmental employment and Ayadi was not treated as significant in himself, but was rather used tangentially as an example of the prominence of some

⁶ Fardust, *Zuhur va Soqut-e Saltanat-e Pahlavi*, pp. 202-03.

⁷ Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi*, p. 196.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., p. 194. The Shah reportedly retorted: “What business do they have with my doctor?”

Baha'is and as a test of the seriousness of the Shah's expressions of support for the dismissals of Baha'is.

Falsafi himself acknowledges the disconnect between his treatment of Ayadi during the pogrom and his treatment while introducing the section of his memoirs dealing with the Baha'is. He explains that it was not until he read Fardust's book, decades later, that he truly understood that Ayadi was more than a simple doctor.¹⁰ He considers the "evidence" attributed to Fardust so important that he quotes several pages of this post-Revolutionary fiction as the context for his discussion of the Baha'i issue, rather than using his own recollections. Throughout this preamble, Ayadi is used as a symbolic representation for all Baha'is, and his supposed crimes are given as the rationale for the collective retaliation that was the 1955 pogrom, even though none of these "facts" were known to Falsafi until more than thirty years later, and most of Fardust's allegations referred to the period after the pogrom.

Beyond the ahistorical framing of the issue, this approach sidesteps the contemporary issues behind the attacks in order to clumsily tie them into Khomeinist national myths about the Pahlavi state. Moreover, after his extensive quoting of Fardust and his post-Revolutionary thesis, Falsafi never maintains or supports these ideas in the body of his discussion, instead slipping into a nebulous series of disjointed vignettes, mostly self-congratulatory, and significant not so much for the little that they reveal, but for the salience of the conspicuous silences that they bracket.

¹⁰ Fardust, *Zuhur va Soqut-e Saltanat-e Pahlavi*, pp. 202-03, 374. In addition, Falsafi's editor, Ali Davani, builds on this theme by pointing to a fellow physician's comments that "Dr. Ayadi, couldn't tell a surgeon's scalpel from a gardener's shovel," using this as evidence that Ayadi was not really serving in a medical capacity. He takes the quote from Alam (*Goftoguha-ye Man ba Shah*, p. 616).

In the second clerical discourse invoked in the body of Falsafi's memoirs—the anti-Baha'i rhetoric of the 1950s—Ayadi is tangential, and the issue is framed in entirely different terms. The chief actors are the people (*mardom*) and the foreign powers, with the clergy acting as agents of the former, the Baha'is acting as agents of the latter, and the Shah placed in the middle and called upon to choose between the people and the Powers.

Baha'is are not only portrayed as a foreign presence, but are framed as the opposite of the legitimate citizenry, as the inverse of the nation. As such, they are consciously excluded from, and placed in opposition to, the *mardom*. The Persian term *mardom* literally means “people” but can also mean “mankind,” “humans,” “folks,” and “the citizenry.” In the clerical discourse, *mardom* is used to convey the idea of “the citizenry,” or people invested with rights who together compose a nation. Baha'is are deliberately excluded from this term by Falsafi, Borujerdi, Behbahani, the clerical deputies in the majles, and others, and are instead referred to indirectly as much as possible and—if direct mention is unavoidable—described through neutered, dehumanized terms such as “individuals” (*afrad*).

This usage of “Baha'i” and *mardom* can be compared to the Nazi use of “Jew” as the antonym of the *volk* (“people”), and the cause of the weakness inflicting the nation. Through nationalist propaganda, *volk* was taken up as a self-identifier and marker of difference that no longer meant merely “people,” but was instead restricted to include only Germanic or Aryan individuals, simultaneously marking those outside of this category as less than human. Baha'is are likewise excluded from *mardom* in order to deny their citizenship rights and linguistically divest them of humanity.

In one of his Ramadan sermons, during an exegesis linking Baha'is to the vainglorious polytheists of previous eras, Falsafi alludes to the dome of the Baha'i National Center and the plans for building a larger domed temple in Iran. He invokes the following verse from the Qur'an: "Do ye build a landmark on every high place to amuse yourselves?"¹¹ He claimed to have chosen this verse because of its condemnation of similar *afrad* in an earlier time. He says:

The prophet of the time [Hud, of 'Ad] is referring to the aristocratic life of the selfish and extravagant individuals [*afrad*] and pointing to their palatial buildings and showing their tyranny concerning the oppressed. Thus, I spoke concerning the Baha'is and their condition in Iran.¹²

More than merely being excluded from *mardom*, the Baha'is were positioned on the other side of this binary, and seen as the embodiment of the forces at work against the citizenry. Falsafi claims that they "lord over the citizenry (*mardom*),"¹³ and he entitles the section of his memoirs detailing the rationale for the pogrom: "The Complaints of the Citizenry (*mardom*) against the Baha'is."¹⁴

Falsafi and his associates did not frame the pogrom as a communal issue between the Baha'is and the Muslims, but rather as a nationalist struggle between the Baha'is and the citizenry. Violence against this minority was not attributed to religious mobs or clerical incitement, but to the natural, organic responses of the citizenry to a foreign agent within it. The pogrom was said to have been brought on by "the frenzy and emotions of the citizenry (*mardom*),"¹⁵ and it was claimed that, for some time, "the folks (*mardom*)

¹¹ Qur'an, 26:128 (Yusuf Ali translation).

¹² Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi*, p. 201.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 197.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

thought of killing the Baha'i leaders."¹⁶ Rather than inciting the people, Falsafi claims that he was actually a calming influence, since he expounded upon "the method that must be used by the folks (*mardom*), and made them aware of the need to preserve security."¹⁷ When murders did occur, it was not due to the actions of the clerics or the Muslims specifically, but rather because "the citizens (*mardom*) slaughtered several Baha'is here and there."¹⁸ Falsafi claims that the delays and reversals on the Baha'i issue were the result of the Shah's attempt to hold back the will of the people, since "from the very first day that the citizenry (*mardom*) arose in protest, the government kept the people's revolutionary emotions leashed and gagged."¹⁹

The "People's Movement"

Falsafi's framing of the issue was part of a larger clerical discourse, which was even occasionally taken up by the government. When, for example, the Shah seized Baha'i centers, Ayatollah Behbahani called for the recognition of the occasion as "a national holiday (*'eid*) for the citizenry (*mardom*)."²⁰ Even Falsafi's reports of what Alam said to him in private are consistent with this framing. Falsafi claimed to remember Alam saying that anti-Baha'i violence was likely to erupt nationwide because "the people (*mardom*) are nervous and angry."²¹

General Bakhtiar likewise employed the terminology of the clerical discourse in his public statements announcing the seizure of Baha'i properties. This act was framed, for external audiences, as an act designed to protect the Baha'is from wild Muslim mobs,

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 198.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 202.

¹⁸ Alam, *Goftoguha-ye Man ba Shah*, pp. 66-67

¹⁹ Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi*, p. 208.

²⁰ *Ettela'at*, 18 Ordibehesht 1334 [May 9, 1955].

²¹ Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi*, p. 202.

while simultaneously being sold locally as a sign of the Shah's support for the "people's movement." Bakhtiar claimed that the seizure was necessary

since the propaganda and unabashed displays (*tazahor*) of the Baha'i sect have come to be the source of the agitation (*tahrik*) of the public's emotions. Therefore, for the preservation of discipline and public order, the disciplinary forces have been directed to occupy this sect's propaganda centers, which have been called 'Haziratu'l-Quds,' so that all possible eventualities will be prevented. At this time, the military governor of Tehran also expects from every patriot that they exhibit consideration in this matter for discipline and public order, and that they diligently refrain from all demonstrations and non-sanctioned actions that are disruptive to public order. Instead, they should feel confident and be assured that... [the Shah] has noticed the emotions and sentiments of the people (*mardom*) and is always considering the welfare and meeting the needs of the public.²²

Here General Bakhtiar explicitly adopts the terminology and rationale of the clerical discourse, much to the chagrin of Entezam and Alam, who were selling the seizure as a protective move on the international scene, and did not anticipate having the nation's security chief releasing a statement that explicitly contradicted their explanations and made common cause with the aggressors. Entezam would later describe Bakhtiar's public statements as one of the government's three main blunders related to the pogrom.²³

Despite the disingenuous nature of most of his statement, Bakhtiar was sincere in his prefacing statements regarding anger over Baha'i identity in public, and his personal discomfort over this issue has been treated elsewhere.²⁴ He was also, in the Reza Shah tradition, fiercely opposed to Muslim public religiosity. Both threads of his discomfort with public religion are evident in the statement, and this gets at the fundamental irony in the clerical demands for action against perceived Baha'i flamboyance in the public sphere. In making the case against the intrusion of a disruptive religious identity into the

²² *Ettela'at*, 16 Ordibehesht 1334 [May 7, 1955].

²³ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 20 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Stevens, May 25, 1955.

²⁴ See Chapter VII.

public sphere, the anti-Baha'i campaign itself came to involve the flamboyant insertion of Shi'ite identity into the public sphere in ways that were judged disturbing and unacceptable by the government and its foreign sponsors, leading to powerful blowback against the clerical establishment.

The elements in the government and military that were most likely to find common cause with the nationalization of anti-Baha'ism were also those who were most influenced by Reza Shah's emphasis on the homogenization of the public sphere and the erosion of religious particularization. These individuals, including Ala and Bakhtiar, were sympathetic to many of the goals of the anti-Baha'i pogrom, and were uneasy about an "out" Baha'i presence, but when American pressure forced the Shah to stall or reverse himself on the Baha'i question, this led Borujerdi and Falsafi to demand continued anti-Baha'i action by resorting to particularistic Shi'ite entries into the public sphere, in ways that the government judged to be even more undesirable than the Baha'i presence.

General Bakhtiar's expression of common cause with the clergy could not have occurred in earlier anti-Baha'i movements, which did not have this nationalist sense of oppositional spatiality, and which instead relied primarily on blood libels, local feuds, and an Islamic rationale. In 1955, unlike the last widespread anti-Baha'i "outbreak" in 1903, the initial appeal to action was made in terms of the citizenry, not the Muslims, and the rhetoric was constructed in a proto-nationalist vernacular inspired by competitive borrowing from Tudeh and other groups.

The 1955 pogrom was branded as "the self-protection of the people (*mardom*)"²⁵ and "the people's (*mardom*) movement."²⁶ These phrases conjure up images of the

²⁵ Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi*, p. 202.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

populism of the Left and are “Islamic” primarily in terms of the choice of target and framing of self. In this populism of the Right, *mardom* does not refer to the masses in general, as with the Leftist use, but is instead used to equate the Shi’ite “nation” within Iran with the nation itself, and to promote the idea that, since there is no difference between the two, there is no need to add the qualifier “Muslim,” as it should be accepted as an unmarked feature of the nation.

Phobic and epidemiologic responses to Baha’ism

In the clerical discourse, *mardom* is conceptualized not just as the citizenry, but as an anthropomorphized embodiment of the nation, a body that is infected by Baha’ism. This “foreign” presence is treated as a cancer to be eradicated, down to the last cell. This concern with a final eradication in order to purify and strengthen the nation is somewhat similar to the Nazi view that the Jews were like a cancer that must be eradicated before the nation could assume her true, healthy and authentic form, and move ahead to greatness.²⁷

According to clerical-deputy Ahmad Safa’i, Baha’is must be explicitly targeted because “they pervert the citizens (*mardom*), take them off of the path of chastity, and are the ones who disturb the country’s security.”²⁸ In Falsafi’s view, this perversion was like a demon possessing the nation, and was a matter so serious that “His Holiness Ayatollah

²⁷ Hitler’s rhetoric against the Jewish “disease” is very similar to that used by Borujerdi and Falsafi in their attacks on the Baha’is. He repeatedly asserted that “Jews are a cancer on the breast of Germany” and, in an August 1920 talk, he warned: “Do not think that you can fight against an illness without killing the germ, without destroying the bacillus; and do not think that you can fight against the racial tuberculosis without making sure that the *volk* gets free from the germ of the racial tuberculosis. The effects of Jewry will never perish, and the poisoning of the *volk* will not end, as long as the germ, the Jew, is not removed from our midst.” Quoted in Richard Weikart, *Hitler's Ethic: the Nazi Pursuit of Evolutionary Progress* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 190.

²⁸ Ahmad Safa’i, *Mazakerat-e Majles-e Shura-ye Melli*, 11th year, Doc. 2995, 3 Khordad 1334, pp. 1-3.

Borujerdi, Ayatollah Behbahani, and the clerical societies, have all of their attention focused on exorcising (*tard*) the Baha'i sect from Iranian society."²⁹ The goal was not merely "liquidating (*tasviyyeh*) the members of this sect in the government bureaucracy,"³⁰ or even "the necessity of repressing and clobbering (*sarkubi*) the Baha'is,"³¹ but rather "the complete eradication of all of their traces"³² and "the extermination of the roots and traces of the Baha'is from the country."³³

Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi was the most powerful advocate of this final solution to the Baha'i problem. In an interview with *Kayhan*, for example, he reaffirmed the necessity of exorcising (*tard*) and exiling (*kharej shodan*) Baha'is.³⁴ In a clerical bill put forward by his supporters, harsh criminal penalties were called for against Baha'is, penalties which seem drawn more from epidemiology than from any Islamic rationale. One article of a proposed bill, for example, insists that if anyone manifests (*tazahor*) outward symptoms of Baha'ism, "the convicted offender will be imprisoned in solitary confinement for terms of two to ten years."³⁵ Not only is the Baha'i religious identity treated like a disease, but it is treated like a contagious one, with infection requiring quarantine or expulsion. Although the Baha'is are marked pacifists, Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi is described in Falsafi's memoir as "afraid" (*bimnak*) of them.³⁶ This is not due to any possible violence on their part, but rather to an existential dread of their very

²⁹ See the series of interviews in *Kayhan*, 16, 19, and 20 of Ordibehesht 1334 [May 7, 10, and 11, 1955].

³⁰ Letter to Falsafi from Ayatollah Borujerdi, dated 15 Ramadan 1374 [May 7, 1955], published in *Ettela'at*, 18 Ordibehesht 1334 [May 9, 1955], and *Kayhan*, 19 Ordibehesht 1334 [May 10, 1955].

³¹ Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi*, p. 201.

³² See the series of interviews in *Kayhan*, 16, 19, and 20 of Ordibehesht 1334 [May 7, 10, and 11, 1955].

³³ Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi*, p. 203, n1.

³⁴ See the series of interviews in *Kayhan*, 16, 19, and 20 of Ordibehesht 1334 [May 7, 10, and 11, 1955].

³⁵ *Kayhan*, 20 Ordibehesht 1334 [May 11, 1955].

³⁶ Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi*, p. 202, n1.

presence within the embodied nation. This phobic reaction is staged as natural and attributed to the nation as a whole.

The “astonishing wave” lifting the nation

For both clerical and governmental actors, framing the pogrom as a “natural” reaction allowed for the diffusion of blame and responsibility, as such a reaction was leaderless and spontaneous. No single actor claimed responsibility, with agency instead being conferred on the amorphous citizenry. Even the clerical leadership, who Shi’ites were supposed to emulate (*taqlid*), claimed a passive role and maintained that they were themselves forced into emulating the will of the people. This placement of the will of the masses over the independent decisions of those vested with religious authority is not without precedent (the most striking example being the Tobacco Protest), but openly acknowledging this and explicitly framing matters in this way was a novel development. In the time of the Constitutional Revolution, it was this very issue of subordinating the independent authority of the clerics to the will of the people that conservatives like Shaykh Fazlallah Nuri raised in order to denounce democracy, seeing this inversion of the flow of *taqlid* to be patently anti-Islamic.³⁷

The citizenry, although being framed as the active agents of the movements, are also described as being themselves caught up in the thrall of larger forces. They are said to have been lifted up and moved by “an astonishing wave (*mawj*) in the country,” which was created after “some people (*mardom*) had seen tyranny (*setam*) done by the hand of

³⁷ See, Vanessa Martin, "The Anti-Constitutionalist Arguments of Shaikh Fazlallah Nuri," *Middle East Studies* 22 (April 1986): pp. 181-91.

that devious sect.”³⁸ This, naturally, led to the citizenry “becoming impassioned” (*beh hayajan amadan*)³⁹ and filled with “agitation” (*tahrik*)⁴⁰ until a public “frenzy” (*shuur / hayajan*)⁴¹ developed that escalated into a “destructive rage” (*khashm-e virangar*).⁴² This idea of a “wave” initiating the violence is bracketed by the description of the conclusion of violence as a “subsiding” (*forukash kardan*) of this supposedly natural, national reaction.⁴³

Sexual dominance and national hegemony

There is a sexual subtext to the words used to describe the motivations for anti-Baha’i violence. Phrases such as *beh hayajan amadan* (“becoming impassioned”) can also refer to becoming sexually stimulated, or achieving an orgasm. Also, the term *shur* (“emotion”) can also allude to sexual passion, and *hayajan* (“frenzy”) can refer to sexual stimulation and orgasm. Likewise, Falsafi’s excitement of the masses is described as *mohayyej* (“stimulating”).⁴⁴

This sexual subtext occurs not only in the descriptions of the citizenry, but also in the senior clergy’s description of their own perception of and reaction to the pogrom. Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi, for example, refers to Falsafi’s assault on the Baha’is as the ripping away of “a certain amount from [Baha’ism’s] thick veil.”⁴⁵ He continues this feminization of the Other, and the use of imagery invoking sexual assault, by

³⁸ Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi*, p. 201.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ *Ettela’at*, 16 Ordibehesht 1334 [May 7, 1955].

⁴¹ Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi*, pp. 200 n1, 202.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 203 n1.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 200 n1.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 203 n1.

⁴⁵ Letter to Falsafi from Ayatollah Borujerdi, dated 15 Ramadan 1374 [May 7, 1955], published in *Ettela’at*, 18 Ordibehesht 1334 [May 9, 1955], and *Kayhan*, 19 Ordibehesht 1334 [May 10, 1955].

congratulating Falsafi for having “pulled up the veil [or hem] to reveal a peek at their true nature [or hidden form].”⁴⁶ This concern with feminizing and sexually dominating the Other becomes even more disturbing because of the Grand Ayatollah’s claim that this forced ripping away of the veil to sexually expose an embodied Baha’ism “has become the cause of pleasure for this lowly one and for the generality of Muslims, and has even brought pleasure to his Holiness, the Guardian of the Age [the Twelfth Imam].”⁴⁷ The fetishistic concern with ripping away the veil to dominate and assert authority, of course, goes back to the Reza Shah period, when Islamic dress was prohibited and the tyranny of forced de-veiling became the most infamous aspect of the enforcement of this provision. This aggressive act feminized and humiliated the conservative opposition to this law. The choice to perceive of the struggle against the Baha’is in these terms seems to indicate a desire to reverse this previous degradation and reclaim masculinity by inflicting similar humiliation on another group.

The clerical discourse is, moreover, infused with phobic paranoia, and the desire to assert dominance over the source of this mental disquiet. This can be seen in several ways: the aggressive imagery of sexual assault chosen to refer to the feelings stirred up by exposure to Baha’ism, the immense discomfort with the external manifestations (*tazahorat*) of this alternative identity, the push for Baha’is to return to closeted existence, and the intense desire to remove any and all reminders of Baha’i identity. Taken together, these desires and reactions suggest that something about an “out” Baha’i identity elicited a violent response that was somewhat comparable to the violent

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

manifestations of homophobia that have arisen in some who view any public display of homosexual identity as an existential threat to their heterosexuality.

There are, of course limits to this analogy, but it gets at the idea that any form of concession regarding the legitimacy of the identity of the Other can be taken as an existential threat, a challenge to the foundational demarcations that form the basis of one's world view. In this instance, Baha'ism was a threat to what would become the founding myth of Iranian Shi'ite nationalism. Namely, that the Iranian nation is fundamentally Shi'ite (containing within it niches for Sunnis and the recognized minorities) and that Shi'ism is the most unifying foundation for a national identity, since Iran supposedly enjoys relative homogeneity in its religious identity, but is irreconcilably diverse in terms of ethnicity and language.

This rationale is comparable to that used by the Hindutva movement in India, which justifies a majoritarian, Hinduism-based nationalism along similar lines. The Hindutva movement also finds places within its discourse for most religious minorities, except for the largest one, the Muslim "other," which complicates and threatens Hindu nationalism just as the presence of the Baha'i "other" complicates and threatens Shi'ite nationalism. Iranian Baha'is and Indian Muslims are problematic for attempts at religious nationalism because there is no acceptable role for these groups in the nationalist cast. As a result, some in the Hindutva movement, in order to maintain the illusion of homogeneity, have put forward egregious lies about the Muslims in India, framing them as primarily the descendants of Muslim invaders, and thus perpetually "foreign" (rather than being primarily the descendants of Indians who willingly converted to Islam). In reality, as the descendants of local converts, they are an authentically local

segment of the population that have opted out of the Hindu umbrella and which, by their very existence, threaten the supposedly natural link between India and Hinduism.

Because of their ancestors' choice to convert, contemporary Muslims have been targeted by some Hindu Nationalists as "national apostates," despite the novelty of nationalism and the antiquity of their families' conversion. These earlier family conversions are nevertheless re-imagined as a contemporary betrayal of the nation.⁴⁸ The Baha'is, likewise, cannot be satisfactorily assimilated into the Shi'ite Nationalist model and are similarly coded as "national apostates" because of their ancestor's decision to convert out of Shi'ism in the pre-national period.⁴⁹ Their existence is a fundamental challenge to the myth of the naturalness of Shi'ism's role as the foundation for the newly-imagined nation, and their history poses several problematic questions. If, for example, Shi'ism was the natural basis for Iranian nationalism, then why did approximately a million Iranians convert out of Shi'ism in favor of Baha'ism in the very period in which Iran was transitioning from empire to nation?⁵⁰

The conservative reply has been that the Baha'is are not the religious group that they pretend to be. They have been, instead, described as a foreign-backed political party, neither local nor authentic, funded and directed by the Power du jour, who were their true benefactors (*hamian-e vaq'i*).⁵¹ There have also been polemical attempts to claim that Baha'ism was a colonial conspiracy from the very beginning. This polemic

⁴⁸ van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism*, pp. 8-10.

⁴⁹ I am simplifying things somewhat. Of course, a small minority of Iranian Baha'is in the 1950s were themselves converts into the religion and were not the descendants of converts and, although most converts in Iran have come from a Shi'ite background, there were also many converts from Jewish and Zoroastrian backgrounds.

⁵⁰ See Appendix I.

⁵¹ Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi*, p. 209.

has never been able withstand close scrutiny, but is nevertheless widely accepted in Iran.⁵²

The point is that, for Shi'ite nationalism in Iran, Baha'is have been one of the fissures disrupting the structural integrity of the imagined nation, just as Muslim identity problematizes Hindu nationalism, Palestinian identity undermines Israeli nationalism, and Kurdish identity challenges Turkish nationalism. Although Baha'is have never employed violence against the state, they are nevertheless seen as a threat to the nation's security because of the challenge that they represent in the contestation over who owns the nation.

This challenge was to the foundations of the nationalist myth, but it was perceived as a tangible assault in the clerical discourse. Speaking of the perceived Baha'i threat, Falsafi claims that “the Muslims of Iran, who are the owners (*malek*) of this land (*sarzamin*), are like the Palestinian Muslims who are the owners of Palestine—except that they do not suffer prolonged exile, bondage, and misfortune.”⁵³ In other words, they are like the Palestinians in none of the characteristics that define them, but are similar in that they are “owners” of a land coveted by a rival people, who have prevented proper nation development.

Borujerdi, writing to Behbahani, describes the Baha'is as not only the cause for Iran's weakness, but the reason for its failure to successfully transition to nationhood. He begins by applauding the closing of the Baha'i headquarters, since it “was exclusively engaged in propaganda against the holy religion,” and claims that it is this Baha'i propaganda “which—naturally—is the cause of disunity with regards to nationality (*adam-e vahdat-e melliyyat*), and which, instead, opposes the independence of the

⁵² See Yazdani, “I'tirāfāt-i Dolgoruki.”

⁵³ Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi*, p. 210.

country and lays the foundation for the enfeeblement of the institution of the monarchy.”⁵⁴ Although Borujerdi supports the institution of the monarchy, he makes it clear that he sees Shi’ism as the basis of Iranian nationalism, taking the extra step of emphasizing the “naturalness” of this assertion. Writing to Falsafi, Borujerdi again reemphasizes that it is Shi’ism that is “naturally the cause of [national] unity.”⁵⁵

Staging “Muslim” violence

Although a Saidian exploration of the Orientalism on display in the British and American documents from this period is beyond the scope of this study, suffice it to say that the available documents confirm the attitudes and practices that one would assume. There is no shortage of gems such as: “[The Shah] appears to be far too civilized and too Occidental to admit of such Oriental deviousness.”⁵⁶ Through descriptions of this nature, we see civilization and civility elided with the West, while the “Oriental” is staged as beyond the boundaries of civilization and its restraints, embodying deviance. My concern is not with such general attitudes, but rather with the specific ways in which anti-Baha’i violence is marked as “Muslim” in contemporary British and American reports.

Throughout the thousands of pages of diplomatic reports relevant to the anti-Baha’i pogrom, certain tropes are repeatedly invoked to explain the violence in Iran, which is almost always coded as “Muslim” violence. As with the clerical discourse, this popular violence is framed as comparable to forces in nature, primordial and reactive. Unlike the clerical discourse, the diplomatic record does not speak of the citizenry reacting in these primordial ways, but only the clergy and the fanatical elements. Rather

⁵⁴ *Ettela’at*, 19 Ordibehesht 1334 [May 10, 1955].

⁵⁵ *Ettela’at*, 18 Ordibehesht 1334 [May 9, 1955]; *Kayhan*, 19 Ordibehesht 1334 [May 10, 1955].

⁵⁶ Bayne, “We are Losing Heart,” p.7.

than representing the natural instincts of a citizenry under invasion, the diplomatic record casts the Baha'is and the educated classes as the “citizens” of the drama—those who were busy leading the nation forward— and frames the religious elements as the inverse of this, an anti-civilizational force pulling the nation chronologically backwards, away from “progress” and towards “medievalism.”

The most common metaphors involve comparing Muslim violence to an “eruption” or a “wave.” In both cases, the implication is that this violence is natural, spontaneous, and lacking both rationality and agency. The implicit message in these documents is that, no matter the superficial civility of the Muslim majority, there exists beneath this superstructure a true essence that is profoundly violent and that may “erupt” in the right circumstances. The idea of the “wave” likewise assumes that Muslims are insincere in their modernity and that, although they may move with the progressive trend, they could just as easily be caught up in a “wave” in the other direction, if left to themselves. In the same vein, the idea of a sudden “storm” expresses the supposedly natural and nascent nature of Muslim communal violence.⁵⁷

Another common image invoked in diplomatic sources is that of Muslim violence as an “outbreak” that needed to be controlled, or a “flare up” of a chronic affliction.⁵⁸ The implication, again, is a lack of agency and the idea that this violence was natural, pre-existing, and ahistorical. This danger is also represented as “a demon... unleashed,” an ancient, supernatural force that threatens Iran’s emerging rational modernity.⁵⁹ The imagery of a demon to be exorcised, or a disease to be contained, is identical to that used

⁵⁷ USDS, *Iraq, 1955-1959*, Reel 15: 142.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 1: 168; Reel 2: 150.

⁵⁹ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 1 / 55, Stevens to FO, May 12, 1955.

in the clerical discourse, but it is here applied to the Muslim combatants rather than the Baha'i targets.

A particularly interesting turn of imagery, related to this need for controlling the demon or disease, is the repeated call to “stem” Muslim violence, which suggests that the Muslim community is in need of a gardener to train it and shape its wild and savage natural inclinations into a more appealing aesthetic.⁶⁰ This idea that violence is due to the lack of firm supervision—which caused reversion and “backsliding” into a wild state—is also implicit in the repeated calls for “firmness” and not showing “weakness” or “timidity” before fanaticism. Without this firm control forcing Muslims to “act... civilized,” the documents suggest a natural state emerges, which is “savage” and “barbarous.”⁶¹

The constant instructions to the Shah to not show fear and to instead confidently express authority is reminiscent of the instructions that one would hear while being instructed on how to treat a dog at obedience school. Indeed, when Alam permitted Falsafi's anti-Baha'i rhetoric, this is described in a British account as Alam having “let Falsafi have his lead [leash].”⁶² Another report notes that the Shah “never got the Mullahs back to heel again.”⁶³ This animalistic, sub-human assessment of the ulama by the British and the Americans is also evident in the repeated claims that harsh discipline is the only thing that will be understood, the pooh-poohing of diplomacy as a waste of time, the idea that they should not “reward” the ulama for bad behavior, and the fear that, without strict discipline, the ulama will, naturally, revert to their wild and violent

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 1: 294; Reel 3: 212.

⁶² TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 2 / 55, Margin notes, stamped received May 17, 1955.

⁶³ Ibid., FO 371 / 127075 / EP 1015 / 30, Notes on Meshed, June 1957,” June 27, 1957.

nature.⁶⁴ As with pets, clerical misbehavior was described as a “show” they were putting on, or as a “game,” and humorous adjectives like “nonsense” were used to describe hate crimes as high jinks.⁶⁵

As a result of being given a loose “leash,” Falsafi is described as having acted according to his nature when he “let the Bahais have it hot and strong.”⁶⁶ The homoerotic subtext of this imagery is not uncommon. The male combatants are described as experiencing “outbursts,” episodes of “release” and sporadic “eruptions,” which were almost like ejaculations of hatred and desire that was built up beneath the surface. Mobs are described as “aroused” and said to participate in a “religious orgy.”⁶⁷ The sexuality projected into the “Muslim” desire for violence can also be seen in its description as a burning “fire” and as a fevered desire that the government had “to damp down.”⁶⁸

There was, moreover, the claim that the violent episodes were manifestations of “medieval ways” and that, while the Westernized classes under the Shah were moving forward in time, the clerics were an anachronistic class pulling Iran backwards along the temporal axis, towards “medieval ways.”⁶⁹ It was argued that “modern day nations do not permit... fanaticism,” the implication being that to permit this violence was to reject the historical moment and to be exiled to the “Oriental Middle Age,” which was a temporal state of mind independent of objective chronology, “a different world, centuries

⁶⁴ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 40 / 55, Wright, “the Bahais,” July 13, 1955.

⁶⁵ Ibid., FO 248 / 1553, Secret Minute by Fearnley, May 17, 1955; FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 26 / 55, Confidential Minute by Stevens, June 6, 1955.

⁶⁶ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 1 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Fearnley, May 11, 1955.

⁶⁷ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 418; FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 1 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Fearnley, May 11, 1955.

⁶⁸ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 1 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Fearnley, May 11, 1955; USDS, *Iraq, 1955-1959*, Reel 15: 148.

⁶⁹ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 24 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Stevens, May 31, 1955.

and civilizations apart,” which Iran had been “at last emerging from” prior to being returned to medievalism through “Muslim” violence against the Baha’is.⁷⁰

The Baha’i Discourse

The “bloodthirsty” clergy

Baha’is themselves often obscure the historicity of the violent episodes in which they are persecuted. There is a long-established tendency to conflate any given incident of anti-Baha’i violence with all previous instances of anti-Baha’i violence, and even with the earlier violence against members of the Babi faith, and to see this violence as natural, fated, and based on emotion and prejudice rather than rational thought or incident-specific causes. There is an almost Zoroastrian tendency in official Baha’i literature to see everything in binary terms, bifurcating groups into the forces of light and those of darkness, and trends and developments into processes of integration and disintegration.⁷¹ The clergy are cast as the perpetual aggressors and the Baha’is as the perpetual tragic heroes experiencing constant tribulation. It is history as *ta’ziyeh*, Karbala stretched over a century and a half of history.⁷²

In a Baha’i account of the previously treated Hormuzak massacre, attackers are said to have been “in a swarm” and acting “in an orgy of unrestrained fanaticism.”⁷³ The term “orgy” is particularly telling, betraying the view that the anti-Baha’i forces were

⁷⁰ Ibid., FO 371 / 127139 / EP 1781 / 3, Russell, “Moharram in Tehran”, September 7, 1957.

⁷¹ Consider, for example, this exploration of the subject of “world-shaking crises”: “Such simultaneous processes of rise and fall, of integration and of disintegration, of order and chaos, with their continuous and reciprocal reactions on each other, are but aspects of a greater Plan, one and indivisible, whose Source is God.” Shoghi Effendi Rabbani, *Letters from the Guardian to Australia and New Zealand* (Australia: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1971), p. 123.

⁷² A Ta’ziyeh is a type of passion play in which the martyrdom of the Imam Husayn at Karbala and the villainy of Yazid are annually recreated, in a manner designed to create intense sympathy and sorrow in the audience as they witness the tragic drama.

⁷³ William Sears, *A Cry from the Heart: The Baha’is in Iran* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1982), p. 42.

caught up in an ecstatic wave that they could not control. All anti-Baha'i forces are seen in this light, as largely driven by the larger forces of destiny, largely indistinguishable and derived from the same mold. "Hand of the Cause of God" William Sears, for example, describes the persecution of Baha'is after the 1979 Revolution as just one part of the ulama's "one-hundred-and-fifty-year-old goal" of genocide, and the completion of the "grand butchery" that began with the persecution of the Babi religion.⁷⁴

In the Baha'i view, the eternal religion of God (which includes every faith tradition around the world that came before it) moves in progressive cycles, with each new prophet-founder tasked with upending the status quo and reviving the moral teachings of the previous religious dispensations, while at the same time bringing new social laws relevant to the exigencies of the historical moment. In this expanding spiral of civilizational growth, there are certain archetypal roles arrayed in support of and in opposition to each new prophet. At the archetypal level, the persecutors of Moses, Jesus, and the Shi'ite Imams were all made from the same mold and played similar ontological functions, in the Baha'i schema.⁷⁵ This cyclical understanding of time and religious persecution can perhaps be best relayed through Baha'u'llah's own contextualization of the persecution that he faced:

At one time Thou didst deliver Me into the hands of Nimrod; at another Thou hast allowed Pharaoh's rod to persecute Me... Again Thou didst cast Me into the prison-cell of the ungodly... And again Thou didst decree that I be beheaded by the sword of the infidel. Again I was crucified for having unveiled to men's eyes the hidden gems of Thy glorious unity... How bitter the humiliations heaped upon Me, in a subsequent age, on the plain of Karbila! How lonely did I feel amidst Thy people! To what a state of helplessness I was reduced in that land! Unsatisfied with such indignities, My persecutors decapitated Me, and, carrying

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 98.

⁷⁵ For an introduction to this aspect of Baha'i thought, see Juan Cole, "I Am All the Prophets: The Poetics of Pluralism in Baha'i Texts," *Poetics Today*, Vol. 14, no. 3 (Fall 1993): pp. 447-76.

aloft My head from land to land paraded it before the gaze of the unbelieving multitude, and deposited it on the seats of the perverse and faithless. In a later age [that of the Bab], I was suspended, and My breast was made a target to the darts of the malicious cruelty of My foes. My limbs were riddled with bullets, and My body was torn asunder. Finally, behold how, in this Day, My treacherous enemies have leagued themselves against Me, and are continually plotting to instill the venom of hate and malice into the souls of Thy servants. With all their might they are scheming to accomplish their purpose....⁷⁶

The opponents of the “forces of light” are de-historicized along these lines and are immediately plugged into these archetypal slots. Although despised, in a sense, these enemies are also seen as almost necessary and fated, with their violence and the Baha’is’ willing martyrdom treated as proof of the new religion’s validity. Likewise, the religion’s founders claimed that the new faith would grow through the ink of the pen and the blood of innocent martyrs, and would expand through alternating cycles of crisis and victory. The tragedy of Iranian Baha’is’ suffering has been, and is presently, treated not only as an opportunity to promulgate the religion, but also as the source of spiritual forces that, if seized upon, could lead to successes for the religion in other locations around the world. Any local or political motivations that would particularize and historicize an episode of anti-Baha’i violence in Iran are rendered almost invisible when viewed through the lens of mainstream Baha’i historiography.⁷⁷

Even some Baha’i academics fall into this simplistic pattern. Moojan Momen, for example, introduces the persecution of Baha’is in 1955 by claiming that Baha’is have been perennial victims in Iran and that, “Despite all the paraphernalia of modern civilization...the land of Iran had not risen from the moral and spiritual debasement portrayed in the pages of *Nabil’s Narrative*” [which chronicled the gleeful massacres of

⁷⁶ Baha’u’llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette: Baha’i Publishing Trust, 1982), p. 89.

⁷⁷ For numerous examples, see Rabbani, *God Passes By*, or the writings of Adib Taherzadeh and Hasan Balyuzi.

Babis a century before].⁷⁸ A more recent example is Fereyduh Vahman's *160 Sal Mobarezeh ba A'in-e Baha'i (160 Years of Combating the Baha'i Faith)*.⁷⁹

There have, however, been some notable exceptions to the ahistorical drift in Baha'i studies. Denis MacEoin was one of the earliest and most significant challengers to the practice of preferring martyrology to contextualized, independent historical studies.⁸⁰ He claims, in *A People Apart*, that the Baha'is' perennial "religious" justification for their persecution is primarily a superstructure to "conceal underlying economic and political motives," and that "political motives, in particular, are plainly visible in several later anti-Baha'i outbreaks."⁸¹ He wonders, as do I, why "there has so far been little real attempt by Western observers of the current Baha'i persecutions to pass beyond the obvious in their explanations of them."⁸² He queries the portrayal of Baha'is as simply victims, and outlines the ways in which they actually did represent a legitimate economic and demographic threat to the ulama.⁸³ He also deconstructs the ways in which both Orientalist writings on the persecution of Baha'is and the Orientalist tendencies of Baha'is themselves combined to further alienate the Baha'i community from the Iranian nation.⁸⁴ By separating the Babi and Baha'i religions, he is able to correctly situate the 1955 pogrom as an unprecedented development that marked the only truly national persecution of the Baha'i religion before the 1979 Revolution.⁸⁵

Unfortunately, MacEoin's approach is atypical and, although it has inspired further

⁷⁸ Momen, *The Seven Martyrs of Hurmuzak*, p. vii.

⁷⁹ I discussed this work in Chapter III.

⁸⁰ In *Debating Muslims*, Michael Fischer has provided one of the most nuanced and useful ethnographic treatments of the persecution of Baha'is in Iran. I am discussing historians in this section, however, so I have highlighted MacEoin's pioneering work.

⁸¹ MacEoin, *A People Apart*, p. 5.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 24.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 3, 9.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 18, 21, 24, 25.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

studies in other areas of Baha'i Studies, martyrology is still the standard approach when it comes to the history of the Baha'is in Iran.⁸⁶ A notable exception is the recent book on the Baha'is of Iran edited by Brookshaw and Fazel.⁸⁷

The Baha'i lobby

It is understandable why the State Department would want to ensure stability in Iran and prevent the anticipated massacres of Baha'is at Moharram, but the level of intervention and concern went beyond mere concern for stability. Secretary of State Dulles, for example, personally sent a telegram ordering intervention to allow Iranian Baha'is to celebrate their holy days, a relatively insignificant internal issue that did not impact American interests in the region and which would not be expected to prompt the involvement of the Secretary of State.⁸⁸ Why get involved beyond restoring stability? The answer may lie in the success of the lobbying efforts of the international Baha'i community.

The Iranian Baha'is' plight was internationalized under the leadership of the religion's international headquarters in Haifa, Israel (where its founder, Baha'u'llah, had

⁸⁶ MacEoin's academic exploration of Babi and Baha'i history has been very poorly received by members of leading Baha'i institutions. Administrative discomfort with the unfiltered analysis of MacEoin and others (including Juan Cole and Abbas Amanat) has spurred strong administrative pressure in the Baha'i community to avoid "materialistic" or "anthropological" approaches to the study of Baha'i history. As a result, when it comes to the history of the Baha'is in Iran, Baha'i explorations have generally remained within the bounds of martyrology and apologetics, or have concerned themselves with attempting to show Baha'i influence in Iran (as long as this influence relates to developments perceived as positive, and influence is discussed in terms of the outer society coming under the influence of the Baha'is, rather than core elements of the Baha'i Faith being shaped by external influences).

⁸⁷ See Fazel and Brookshaw, *The Baha'is of Iran*. It is worth noting that most of the more important chapters in this collection were written by authors who are not and never have been Baha'is, which can be seen as a positive development in that it shows that progress has been made in the integration of Baha'i history into Iranian Studies proper, and that Baha'i Studies has advanced a great deal since MacEoin's observation that "myself excepted, there are no non-Baha'is writing seriously on the subject" (Denis MacEoin, "The Crisis in Babi and Baha'i Studies: Part of a Wider Crisis in Academic Freedom?" *Bulletin* (British Society for Middle Eastern Studies), 17:1 (1990), p 55.

⁸⁸ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 416.

died in exile as a political prisoner of the Ottoman Empire). By 1955, the charisma of the religion's founders had been routinized into a sophisticated administrative system headed by the great-grandson of the founder of the religion, Shoghi Effendi Rabbani (d. 1957).⁸⁹ Although fluent in Persian, Shoghi Effendi had never actually been to Iran. As a result, he did not have direct experience with the realities on the ground in Iran, and his perspective was sometimes colored by the Orientalist schemas that he became familiar with as a result of his Western education.

When Shoghi Effendi heard of the pogrom, he was alone in Switzerland without any advisors.⁹⁰ This was because, as mentioned previously, the Baha'is were caught completely off guard. He responded to the pogrom immediately, without being afforded the luxury of preparation and careful contemplation of the situation within Iran. It is possible that he would have approached the situation differently if he had the ability to properly consult with the Iranian Baha'is and discover the political and economic underpinnings of the Ramadan campaign, the lack of interest in the campaign in much of Iran, and the likely inability of the ulama to actually follow through with their threats of a later massacre. Threats of an imminent general massacre were largely stock elements in campaigns of this type, as seen in Ayatollah Kashani's previously discussed extortion of the Jewish community, or similar threats made against the Baha'is in earlier decades.⁹¹ These threats could not materialize unless the state itself was fully behind the call for genocidal acts, a scenario which never occurred during the Pahlavi period.

⁸⁹ All of the major treatments of Shoghi Effendi are hagiographic to varying degrees; the most informative of these is *The Priceless Pearl*, by his widow, Ruhyyih Rabbani (London: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969).

⁹⁰ Rabbani, *The Priceless Pearl*, p. 312.

⁹¹ See Appendix III.

Shoghi Effendi had just approved the designs for a Baha'i House of Worship in Iran and the construction of this building was to have been a symbolic "claiming" of Iran as part of a larger, highly-ambitious, global missionary "Crusade," aimed at further establishing the Baha'i Faith as a world religion.⁹² Shi'ite anger at this proposed project and the desire to stop this symbolic claiming of Iran through violence has already been touched upon in previous chapters. The Temple plans had to be abandoned (in favor of an African Temple and increased goals elsewhere) because "just as the design for the Temple had been chosen and announced...the blow fell" and "a sudden violent storm of persecutions against the Persian Baha'is broke loose," involving rape and "wanton murder," while the government did nothing before "the frenzy of the mobs, who were not only unrestrained but actually encouraged."⁹³

This violent campaign made the idea of symbolically claiming Iran impossible. Baha'is were instead urged to achieve "victories" for the "Crusade" elsewhere in the world to upset "the challenge flung down by its bitterest, most powerful and inveterate enemies... bloodthirsty ecclesiastical oppressors."⁹⁴ In response to the clerical challenge, Shoghi Effendi "struck back at the forces of darkness" and "hurled his spears left and right in...defense."⁹⁵ These "spears" were the lobbying efforts of the highly efficient administrative system that he had crafted over the previous decades, and the Baha'i connections at the United Nations (where they had been involved since its creation and actively involved as an official NGO since 1947).

⁹² For the Ten Year Crusade, see UHJ, ed., *The Baha'i World, Volume XIII: 1954-1963* (Haifa: UHJ, 1970).

⁹³ *Ibid.*, p. 789.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 292.

⁹⁵ Rabbani, *The Priceless Pearl*, p. 312.

Before treating the lobbying efforts themselves, it is worth noting that many of the Baha'i tropes, such as the natural "storm" or the vampiric imagery of the "bloodthirsty" clergy being loosed, like wild animals, are identical to those used in the British and American documents, and speak to a shared vocabulary and system of coding. At the same time, the use of binary oppositions and ahistoricized, "inveterate" foes, provide potent examples of the Baha'i elision of historical particularity.

Shoghi Effendi believed that the only way God would have allowed this crisis was if the ulama were being used as instruments to usher in an even greater victory than the one he had initially conceived, as part of a cosmic calculus balancing crisis and victory. The pogrom was thus imagined as a "mighty blast of God's trumpet" that would "awaken governments...in both the East and West, to the existence... of this Faith."⁹⁶ He immediately "rallied the Baha'i world, uniting it in one tremendous wave of protest," with the result that "for the first time in the history of the Faith in Persia, prominent figures fully realized this was not a 'local sect' but a world-wide, tightly knit, independent religious community."⁹⁷ Persian Baha'is did not "stand alone" and this was effectively demonstrated as the Iranian government was "bombarded by cables with names of cities and towns whose geographic whereabouts they were profoundly ignorant." This unprecedented lobbying effort aimed to "exert a restraining influence on the perpetrators of these monstrous acts."⁹⁸

The biggest concern, however, was the possibility of a "wide-spread massacre" in Moharram that had "became very real" and was "openly promised" in the press and in

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ UHJ, *The Baha'i World, Volume XIII*, p. 292.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 293.

mass anti-Baha'i gatherings.⁹⁹ Shortly after the beginning of the anti-Baha'i pogrom, the State Department was being pressed on this matter by at least one Senator and one Congressman, as well as by a flood of mail from across America.¹⁰⁰ There were also several articles in the press, protest rallies in New York City, and delegations of concerned citizens meeting with the State Department.¹⁰¹ At a U.N. conference in Geneva, Baha'is showed up with lawyers and ever-growing piles of documents.¹⁰² It became clear very quickly that although the Baha'is generally avoided politics, this did not apply to matters of self-preservation; when pressed, they were a surprisingly effective lobbying group.

The content of the appeals made by American Baha'is is worth noting, as it confirms Denis MacEoin's claim that the selective language and terminology of Baha'is themselves unwittingly lent weight to the ulama's claim that they are "foreign." In the letters from American Baha'is, all of the exotic, Iranian elements of the Baha'i religion are deliberately ignored, and the appeal for help is made on Christian and patriotic grounds.

An August 19 letter from Horace Holley (writing for the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States) portrays the suffering of the Baha'is in Iran as "one of the most impressive examples of spiritual heroism in the annals of religion – only paralleled by the sufferings of early Christians themselves."¹⁰³ He further stages the attacks on these Christian analogues as "sheer fanaticism constituting an outrage against

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 789.

¹⁰⁰ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 315-316, 371-72, 408.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 319, 324.

¹⁰² UHJ, *The Baha'i World, Volume XIII*, pp. 789-90.

¹⁰³ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 362.

the modern mind.”¹⁰⁴ By rejecting the modernity of the attackers and linking the victims to the origin myths of Christianity, Holley is asking Eisenhower to intervene in order to block a cyclic repetition of the horrors of the past, to guard progress from a resurgent, primeval terror.

In addition to framing the Iranian Baha’is as religious cognates, they are also staged as pseudo-American through the flattering and overtly patriotic nature of some of the appeals. Dorothy Shottis, for example, shares in her letter to the President that “I have always prayed for you and your dear family,” and “I shall continue [this so] that divine guidance and strength will bring relief from such atrocities through you—whom the entire world loves, respects, admires.”¹⁰⁵ Fred Morgan’s appeal escalates the patriotic appeal by bringing up the Second World War, alluding to the Holocaust and how it may happen again in Iran, and concluding with a pointed challenge to Eisenhower’s masculinity. He begins by identifying himself as a veteran of World War II, and warns the President that, “Baha’is are being taken away to a special building and no one knows the fate of those taken away.”¹⁰⁶ He challenges Eisenhower by saying, “If you are the man I felt you were when you signed my promotion order in World War II, you will promptly give this matter your whole-hearted attention, and...your vigorous action...these actions in Iran are not the sort of thing we in the United States wish to see perpetuated upon the members of any faith.”¹⁰⁷ He returns to the gendered aspect to his challenge by saying, “I trust that... as a man you will feel the same way.”¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 363.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 387-88.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 391.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 392.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 391-92.

In the lobbying efforts on behalf of persecuted Assyrians a decade before, petitioners made ethnicity-based appeals as Assyrian-Americans or ecumenical appeals, as American Christians writing on behalf of a foreign congregation.¹⁰⁹ The Baha’i writers, however, were appealing both as members of the victimized group as well as invoking their unmarked, all-American identities and employing the term “we” in such a way that it was extended to include both Eisenhower and the Iranian Baha’is, bridging the two disparate identities.

In Vinson and Barbara Brown’s letter to the White House, for example, they highlighted their unmarked, All-American identity, collapsing what was happening in Iran into their Rockwellian 1950s existence and making the danger on the other side of the world seem like a threat to the heartland. They describe their little ranch in California and tell the President that, “from your interest in ranching, it is probably the kind of life you would like to lead,” full of peace and quiet, with nothing but “crickets and tree frogs.” They say that their life is a “kind of paradise” where “war and strife and hatred and prejudice seem far away.” However, “today the hand of religious prejudice and hatred has reached across the sea and into our home.” That is to say the attacks on Baha’is in Iran are portrayed as an attack striking into the American heartland. The Browns identify themselves as Baha’is and say they enjoy the religious freedom of their beloved American homeland, but across the world their co-religionists are tortured and persecuting for being part of a religion that “only preaches love and understanding between men, obedience to local governments, and oneness under the God of all religions.” They also explain the 1955 pogrom by referring to the Iranian Baha’is as

¹⁰⁹ See Appendix II.

Christian analogues, saying, “It is like the Seventeenth Century when Protestant Christians were tortured because of their faith.”¹¹⁰

In addition to the letters to the State Department, Congress, and the White House, there were also many telegrams, especially to President Eisenhower, and the pace of these transmissions was renewed after the atrocities in Hormuzak. Most of these telegrams were similar in structure and resembled the following example from “the Baha’i Group of Vermont,” dated August 25, 1955:

With burning indignation protest latest atrocity in Iran martyrdom of seven innocent members Baha’i community easily provable to be most law abiding loyal citizens of nation urgently ask United States government take initiative intervene in situation unbearable to conscience of civilized world and creating instability in critical area endangering the peace of the whole world.¹¹¹

Some, however, were more heated, such as this August 12 telegram from Attleboro Baha’is:

Pray use your influence for protection of Baha’is of Iran from further massacres and atrocities by satanic Moslems we look up to you as the instrument of peace on this earth.¹¹²

This is, perhaps, the most extreme example of the de-contextualization of Iranian Baha’is, as they are so absorbed into the “we” of the American converts to this Iranian religion that the appeal to help their co-religionists is framed in a way that Christianized the tragedy to the point that Islam is demonized as “satanic,” despite the fact that the Baha’i Faith rejects the positive existence of Satan and devils and, more importantly, is

¹¹⁰ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 379.

¹¹¹ EPL, White House Telegraph Office /Box 130 / Incoming Telegrams / “Baha’is” (1) august 1955, from the Baha’i Group of Vermont, dated August 25, 1955.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, from the Baha’is of Attleboro Mass., dated August 12, 1955.

itself derived from Islam, affirms the truth of Islam, and draws much of its content from Islam.

As a point of comparison, it is worth noting that the number of telegrams that Eisenhower received in connection with the Baha'i pogrom was more than three times greater than the telegrams received in connection with the murder of Emmett Till. Till was a fourteen-year-old African-American boy whose lynching in rural Mississippi in 1955 (after supposedly whistling at a white woman) was one of the events that sparked the American Civil Rights Movement. Till's murder led to several hundred telegrams, while there are well over a thousand telegrams to the President alone about the pogrom against the obscure Baha'i minority on the other side of the world, such was the intensity of the Baha'i lobby.¹¹³

Despite the State Department's awareness of what was happening in Iran and its obvious concern and deep involvement in addressing the Baha'i pogrom—it received “almost daily attention” in the Department—there was a conscious attempt to downplay, outside of the Department, the instability in Iran and the extent of what had happened there. Apparently, this was done out of a desire to prevent public or congressional concern that American faith in the Shah, and his CIA-assisted reinstatement, had been a mistake. In the response to a query by Senator Herbert Lehman, for example, the calls for the eradication of the Baha'is on state radio was sanitized by the State Department, who merely spoke of the sect being “criticized” in some “sermons” that led to a few “demonstrations” before the Iranian government ended it.¹¹⁴ No mention is made of the government's role as anything but the restorer of order. The same letter offered a

¹¹³ I did not count individual telegrams. This is a rough estimate based on a comparison of the height of the stacks of telegrams related to the two tragedies.

¹¹⁴ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 315.

legalistic rejection of accusations against the Iranian government, claiming that it was untrue that the Baha'is were "illegal," but instead they merely had "no status under the law" and that they were not prohibited, but it was just that their continued right to exist was not recognized.¹¹⁵ In explaining the campaign, there was no mention of its political and economic aspects, or the initial participation of the Shah. Instead, everything was blamed on the fanaticism of Muslims, who rode a "wave of emotional feeling which stimulated this brief but unfortunate episode."¹¹⁶

The content of the response to Senator Lehman elicited an angry response by Julie Chanler of the Baha'i-inspired Caravan of East and West, which angrily denounced this "untrue" response as a "glossing over of the facts." This rebuttal strongly took issue with the State Department's attempt to pin blame on Oriental passion instead of acknowledging to the senator that the pogrom had occurred on the "order of the government." Her rebuttal called for immediate action on the rationale that the anti-Baha'i pogrom was the result of fascism taking root in Iran, under a new name and an Islamic cover, and that this must be combated quickly as "fascism rides swiftly."¹¹⁷

Chanler, although ostracized from the Baha'i community for over a dozen years by this point (for reasons that are complicated and irrelevant), was one of the most active defenders of Iranian Baha'is, constantly lobbying Congress and the United Nations. She chided the State Department for the "gentle handling" of Iran that had "brought the minimum of results." She was able to talk her way into meeting Mr. Hanna, the head of the Iran division, and urged him to "stir the State Department to a more bold and definite attitude in this matter," so that it would "bring its mighty influence to bear on Iran." She

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 316.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 315.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 319.

deftly highlighted Iran's new status as an American client, and the damage that a rogue client posed to its sponsor. "Shouldering our responsibility in 'America-backed Iran' would greatly heighten our credit at home and abroad," she maintained, while "ensuring Mr. Nixon a pleasant weekend in Tehran," and acting cautiously out of concern for Islamic countries, "amount to less than nothing."¹¹⁸

In a June 9 letter by to the U.N. Commission of Human Rights, she strongly lobbies on behalf of Iran's "one million" Baha'is, pointing out that, despite signing the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Shah now allows "one of the crudest and most dangerous violations of religious freedom in modern times." The post-War ideals of freedom were now imperiled by the Shah's "arrogant challenge" to the spirit of the United Nations.¹¹⁹ She goes on to list in detail each and every international law violated by the pogrom and, like a pioneer for Bush-era politics, challenges the United Nations to take action against this Islamic fascism or prove itself irrelevant.

The communications from the Baha'i International Community to the United Nations made more moderate appeals, claiming that Iran was in "flagrant violation" of the human rights agreements that it had signed.¹²⁰ In an effort to prevent the embarrassment that would result from a successful Baha'i appeal at the United Nations, the Department of State tried to persuade the American Baha'i leadership that the Iranian government was already doing a great deal and that there was no need to actually go to the United Nations and that they should instead consider leaking their intention to certain officials in Iran, who were slow to protect the Baha'is, and that this threat would have the

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 398.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 320.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 325.

same result as the actual appeal, and avoid unnecessary blowback. The Baha'is rejected this suggestion, since it "might diminish the publicity value of the UN appeal."¹²¹

In August, as Moharram drew closer, there was an "intensified campaign to focus world attention on Iranian persecution." Telegrams and other communications increased to the point that the president received more than 200 telegrams on this matter over a three day period. On the global stage, other national communities were engaged in similar efforts with their respective governments, and the Baha'is also made their case in Geneva, to the United Nations. In private communications, Entezam claimed that a Baha'i victory at the United Nations would actually be beneficial for the Cabinet as it "would provide a welcome lever against extremists."¹²²

In this atmosphere of tension as Moharram approached, Dulles wrote to the Tehran Embassy and stressed that the Shah should be warned yet again about the dangers of anti-Baha'i action during Moharram, and that he be briefed on the "increased public pressure in the US" over the condition of Iranian Baha'is. The embassy was also to discuss the appeal at the United Nations and "emphasize the dangers this holds for Iran's foreign reputation" and that, because of the worldwide distribution of the photographs showing Bakhtiar and Batmanghelich destroying the dome of the National Baha'i Center, there was global awareness of the government's participation in the pogrom and, as such, if any additional events were to occur, it "might set in motion even more serious world reactions."¹²³

In Geneva, the Baha'i delegation met with all non-Communist and non-Arab countries and also attempted to see the Secretary-General. There was the sense that time

¹²¹ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 1: 167.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 183.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

was running out as the “promised massacre drew steadily closer.”¹²⁴ They retained legal representation, quickly amassed evidence of the pogrom, and made presentations to sympathetic delegates, NGOs, and others. Ultimately, however, the delegation believed that they were not going to be successful. These sentiments persisted until the American delegation and the High Commissioner for Refugees descended at the last minute—as a *deus ex machina*—backed the Baha’is, and were able to arrange for the Secretary General to have the High Commission for Refugees meet, on the Baha’is’ behalf, with the head of the Iranian delegation and his brother, the Minister of Foreign Affairs. The Entezam brothers were shocked, since “Their government had been certain that the UN would not intervene to save the Baha’is... [and] the intervention of the Secretary-General astounded the Iranian government.” The combination of American and international support was said to have “brought an immediate end to the physical persecution and lifted the danger of massacre.”¹²⁵ Still, Baha’is who were fired were not rehired, the government retained possession of all major Baha’i properties, and Baha’is were forbidden from having gatherings. These lingering effects caused the Baha’i lobby, buoyed by its success at the United Nations and with the State Department, to continue to press for a complete return to the status quo.

The Governmental Response

Managing the press

The Iranian press was controlled by the government as well as by powerful individuals. On one occasion, for example, Ebtehaj (the head of the Plan Organization) forced a

¹²⁴ UHJ, *The Baha’i World*, Vol. XIII, p. 789.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 790.

reporter to retract a story that he disliked. When asked why he complied with this request, the reporter explained that “He is powerful...What couldn’t he do to me!”¹²⁶ During the anti-Baha’i agitations, the foreign press was also censored and threatened, and diplomatic pressure was even applied in an attempt to have foreign powers discipline their reporters in Iran.

Before the coup, Iran had been considered a “good news town” due to the high drama, and there were over sixty foreign correspondents in Tehran. After the return of the Shah there was still some interest in General Zahedi and the oil agreement. After 1954, however, Iran entered a state of relative calm and it was felt that there was no compelling reason to maintain a media presence in Iran. As a result, “by the spring of 1955, there were no American reporters in Iran.”¹²⁷ Reuters and Agence France Presse, however, had one reporter each, but neither submitted frequent reports. Other agencies maintained local “ringers.”

During the 1955 pogrom, the Reuters agent (Buist) posted a rather short and straightforward report. As a result, he was summoned to see Minister of the Interior Alam and Parviz Adl, the acting director of the Press and Information Department. Both men questioned him about why he would cover the story, particularly the government’s participation in the destruction of the dome of the Baha’i headquarters in Tehran. The two men, speaking in a “meanly-mouthed way,” tried to bring “as much pressure as they dare exert” on a well-connected British citizen.¹²⁸ Faced with pressure to censor himself—both by the Iranian authorities and elements in his own embassy—Buist

¹²⁶ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 25: 748.

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 746.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 747.

consistently refused to back down, insisting that he was not willing to censor a story “off his own bat.”¹²⁹

Alam was especially incensed at Buist after the BBC broadcasts into Iran relayed, in Persian, information originally submitted in Buist’s Reuters reports, circumventing internal censorship. He raised the issue with Adl and was assured that the BBC had since “amended” their coverage. But, according to Fearnley’s embassy report, “This is sheer daydreaming on Dr. Adl’s part. I made it quite clear to him that we will convey his requests to the BBC but that there was no guarantee of the BBC agreeing to it—as in fact they didn’t.”¹³⁰

According to Adl, the objectionable material in the broadcasts also included the claim that “disorder reigned” in Iran and that it was in a “very serious economic crisis.”¹³¹ He believed the BBC had “attacked” Iran by transmitting Persian reports, “criticizing social conditions and religious intolerance in Persia.”¹³² In Adl’s view, the BBC was just another word for the British government and he interpreted their reporting as an indirect attack by the British government against the Iranian government, over their own airwaves.

Ambassador Stevens was somewhat sympathetic to this point and, although he expressed understanding of the BBC’s refusal to retract the story, and the Foreign Office’s disinclination to intervene with the news agency, he nevertheless asked the Foreign Office if it is “really sound policy” to broadcast in Persian to a general Iranian audience “news or comment on Persian internal affairs of a kind which may offend

¹²⁹ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 22 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Wiggi, May 19, 1955.

¹³⁰ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 17 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Fearnley, May 24, 1955.

¹³¹ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 15 / 55, Stevens to FO, May 26, 1955.

¹³² Ibid.

Persian susceptibility or lead to undesirable interpretations of the British (including, as they see it, Her Majesty's Government's) attitude." It was, in his view, hopeless to try to try to convince the Iranians that the BBC did not directly reflect the view of the government and complaints like this would continually resurface, "particularly with a Government as jittery as the present one."¹³³ Although the BBC Persian service was trying to be "comprehensive and objective," from the embassy's view there are "clearly occasions when we should prefer the picture not to be too comprehensive or objective as, for example, when a friendly Persian Government are trying to play down an embarrassing affair." In such a case:

reference to local riots, or economic crises, or social backwardness or religious intolerance, however carefully worded and even if attributed to non-BBC sources, are not calculated to help, at any rate with the Government of the day and their supporters. We have already seen a malicious article in one paper about the BBC Baha'i report.¹³⁴

Stevens felt that the "Persian Government is rattled and thoroughly embarrassed by the Baha'i question...and are doing their best to play it down." He hoped that the

BBC can be persuaded to broadcast a denial and to eschew this sort of news in future in their Persian language broadcasts. If outright denial is too unpalatable to BBC, denial attributed to 'competent Persian authorities' (but not the Persian Government) would be better than nothing."¹³⁵

In London's response to Stevens, they acknowledge the hegemonic nature of the belief that the government controls the BBC, but make it clear that they "do not wish to foster that belief by conveying any impression that protests to H.M. missions will bring

¹³³ Ibid.

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 8 / 55, telegraph from Tehran to FO, May 18, 1955.

governmental influence to bear” and as such “The BBC cannot be asked to bring itself into disrepute by denying, apparently spontaneously, the truth of this report.”¹³⁶

Coercion was less subtle with Iranian reporters. Parviz Medi, an Iranian employed by the Associated Press, was summoned to General Bakhtiar where he was abused for the length of his coverage of the pogrom (2000 words) and was threatened and scared into silence, his photographs of the pogrom confiscated. The local reporter for *Time* magazine, however, was not summoned, since his report, though longer (7000 words), did not include any comments or analysis and did not discuss the government’s culpability. As for reporters and editors from the local press, they only wrote what was acceptable to the government. As one local reporter explained it, “The Government kicked them out [i.e. foreign reporters in previous years]; it would kick us ‘in.’”¹³⁷

The biggest test of this attempt to control the press came with the June 27 anti-Baha’i riot in Shiraz, during which security forces shot into an anti-Baha’i mob in order to protect a Baha’i holy site under their control.¹³⁸ British archival sources confirm that, within hours of the incident, informed sources in Tehran were aware that there had been mob violence in Shiraz over the Baha’i issue and that there were at least three deaths and fifty total casualties, resulting in the imposition of a curfew and martial law and an emergency meeting of the cabinet. The initial information was, however, vague about the two parties in the clash, which camp the victims came from, and the circumstances in which the clash occurred.¹³⁹

¹³⁶ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 10 / 55, telegram FO to Tehran, May 20, 1955.

¹³⁷ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 25: 747.

¹³⁸ See Chapter V.

¹³⁹ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 34 / 55, Burrows to FO, June 29, 1955.

That night, General Bakhtiar's office "immediately phoned correspondents and made it clear that they were to file nothing but the official communiqué" in relation to the Shiraz episode. All local and foreign reporters complied with the press blackout except for Buist, who sent a short report about chaos in Shiraz, although he did not know the specifics of what had occurred and did not know of or mention the massacre. Buist bravely chose to send the story despite threats from Bakhtiar's assistant and a call from Dr. Adl begging him not to disseminate the story "for Persia's sake" since it "would do so much harm."¹⁴⁰

Although Buist apparently sent his telegram, it is possible that it did not make it to the home office, or only did so in potted form. An Iranian working on behalf of the Associated Press and the *Daily Mail* also believed that he filed a telegram to the home office on the day of the Shiraz incident, only to have it handed back to him later that night by a policeman who said "you won't be sending this will you?" The following morning all Iranians employed by foreign newspapers were "sent for" by General Bakhtiar and explicitly forbidden from reporting on the actual events in Shiraz. A "special warning" was given to Mozandi of the *Daily Express* who had gotten in trouble with the press controllers in the past. The local press was similarly warned. The only permitted coverage—based on two official communiqués—made vague mention of rioting and said that martial law had been imposed, order restored, and the (unnamed) responsible parties punished. In these official versions there "was no mention of the Baha'is."¹⁴¹ Everyone complied with Bakhtiar's demands.

¹⁴⁰ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 25: 747.

¹⁴¹ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 34 / 55, Burrows to FO, June 29, 1955.

Despite the threats against him, Buist was protected by the British and did not suffer for his actions. He immediately informed the British embassy of the situation, and it was decided that he “should be supported if there is any trouble.”¹⁴² The situation remained tense between the government and the press until the security situation was stabilized in summer and the government promised the return of good relations “provided you reporters behave.”¹⁴³ Burrows, of the British Embassy, was quite annoyed by the treatment of Buist and met with Hamzavi, the Shah’s consultant on media matters, to express his anxiety “at the way this Bahai business is being handled, as regards the foreign press.” Although internal censorship and discipline did not concern him, he warned that “muzzling of foreign correspondents” was unacceptable. He also took issue with Hamzavi over his government’s “attempts to delude foreign opinion by such letters as that to the “Times” from the Second Secretary of the Persian Embassy,” which he warned would likely “cause unfavourable reactions in informed and free countries.”¹⁴⁴

In this June 17 letter to *The Times*, Sanandaji (of the Persian Embassy in London) attempted to respond to the negative press concerning the anti-Baha’i pogrom. In the letter, it is claimed that there is complete freedom of religion in Iran, but that this was not relevant to the Baha’is as they are “a political sect” and no government on earth would allow freedom of religion to be used as an excuse whereby “under the guise of so-called religion” such a group could “carry out deeds of dissension and violence inspired by its leaders from without.” The letter also makes the claim that there were no more than two

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 25: 748.

¹⁴⁴ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 34 / 55, Burrows to FO, June 29, 1955.

thousand Baha'is in all of Iran and that "it is completely untrue that the Baha'i and their homes have been attacked."¹⁴⁵

Burrows was so annoyed by this letter that he felt that the British should not "let these lies go by without comment" since "The Persians are very lucky not to have stirred up a hornet's nest by these tactics."¹⁴⁶ Denis Wright agreed with Burrows, and felt that it was bad for "mutual confidence" if the Iranian government's representatives in London were "encouraged officially to foist lies on the British public."¹⁴⁷ In his opinion, "This will no doubt be torn to pieces by correspondents who know the facts... they will have done less damage to their reputation by keeping silent."¹⁴⁸ The absurdity of the "two thousand" claim particularly annoyed Wright, who pointed out that even J.R. Richards 1932 polemic placed the number of Baha'is at thirty thousand, while one hundred thousand was the low-end of conservative estimates in more objective studies, like the NID handbook from 1945, and the contemporary figure was undoubtedly higher, in the six figures.¹⁴⁹

In his reply to the Sanandaji letter, also published in the *Times*, John Ferraby (writing on behalf of the National Spiritual Assembly of the British Isles) gives what the British embassy saw as a "sober reply" that "seems fairly factual."¹⁵⁰ Ferraby points out that the Baha'i religion is not political and that, in reality, political involvement by any Baha'i leads to his or her expulsion. Furthermore, the religion is completely peaceful,

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 31 / 55, FO to Chancery, June 20, 1955.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 34 / 55, handwritten note by Burrows, June 22, 1955.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., handwritten note by Wright, June 22, 1955.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 31 / 55, FO to Chancery, June 20, 1955.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 34 / 55, handwritten note by Wright, June 22, 1955.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 38 / 55, handwritten minutes related to clipping by Ferraby, author illegible.

even when attacked, and this is established by its “record” of twenty thousand martyrs.¹⁵¹ Regarding the issue of Baha’i numbers, Ferraby claims that the figure of the Persian embassy in London (two thousand) and those of the “enemies of the faith in Persia” (Falsafi’s claim of one million) are both incorrect, while the truth lay between the two, and “hundreds of thousands have registered themselves there, apart from the many who have not registered.”¹⁵²

In reply to Burrows concerns about the Persian embassy’s letter, especially the claim of its author (Sanandaji) that he wrote the letter because he was instructed by his government, Hamzavi maintained that Sanandaji was acting on his own.¹⁵³ Disassociating himself, Hamzavi “expressed dismay” and assured Burrows that “very drastic action” was being taken to avoid a repeat of “this kind of thing.”¹⁵⁴ Wright never accepted these denials, however, and believed that Hamzavi was “one of the nastier pieces of work” that he had met, and that he was “playing a singularly unpleasant game,” trying to discredit Sanandaji to protect himself.¹⁵⁵ Hamzavi was known to be very ambitious and unsatisfied in his position. To further himself, he tried to have Alam removed, jockeyed to be named the Minister of Court, and was known to have spread

¹⁵¹ This number of 20,000 martyrs was originally mentioned in European accounts but was later repeated by early Baha’i leaders (Abdu’l-Baha and Shoghi Effendi). Neither figure claimed to be inerrant in historical matters, but this number was nevertheless accepted as an unchallengeable fact by many adherents. Later scholarship, however, has established that “only” several thousand were killed (if one were to include the widows and dependents of those killed, this may approach 20,000). The scope of these Babi massacres is important to Baha’is because, as Amanat points out, “it was a founding tragedy that was permanently etched into Baha’i collective memory and which defined the religion’s identity formation” (Amanat, “Historical Roots,” p. 170).

¹⁵² *The Times*, July 1, 1955.

¹⁵³ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 51 / 55, Wright to FO, September 15, 1955.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 38 / 55, handwritten minutes related to clipping by Ferraby, author illegible.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 51 / 55, Wright to FO, September 15, 1955.

many “whopping lies.”¹⁵⁶ Given his intrigues, it was felt likely that “Hamzavi himself was probably personally responsible.”¹⁵⁷

The issue persisted and, as late as October, when Wright met with the Prime Minister, he again brought up Sanandaji’s “famous Baha’i letter” and the embassy’s impression that, given their dealings with Sanandaji, it was obvious that “he had clearly written the letter under instructions” despite the Prime Minister’s assurance that he “acted on his own bat.” As Wright began to untangle the matter, he suspected that general instructions came from Tehran but the actual framing of the letter came from Sanandaji although “It is difficult to know where the truth lies.”¹⁵⁸

Sanandaji, for his part, attempted to defend himself by showing Wright documents proving that he had been “bombarded with instructions” from Iran to say what he said.¹⁵⁹ Sanandaji was believed to be sincere when he said that he would have never made the ridiculous statements in the letter if he was not compelled to do so. He claimed that, “as a Kurd and a Sunni,” he “was a firm believer in toleration for all minorities.” As absurd as the letter to *The Times* was, it “was nothing compared with what he had been told to say.”¹⁶⁰

The Shah’s government had little concern for negative coverage of the anti-Baha’i pogrom in the American press, but was anxiously concerned about the “campaign” that the British press was conducting against them over the Baha’i issue. Most seemed to believe that the British government controlled their nation’s press and that in some way the press was expressing the opinion of the British government, since some prominent

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 50 / 55, FO to Wright, September 12, 1955.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 54 / 55, Confidential memo by Wright, October 6, 1955.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 51 / 55, Wright to FO, September 15, 1955.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 44 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Wright, August 24, 1955.

news agencies like the BBC received state funds. There was also a somewhat less widespread belief that the American press reflected the opinion of Washington, but there was less concern about what it had to say, perhaps because it was more remote, was not consumed in Iran the way that the British press was, and lacked the prestige of the *Times* or the BBC.

Blaming the British: a “common Iranian psychosis”

The most common interpretation of the anti-Baha’i pogrom, actively encouraged by the Iranian government, was that the pogrom was a British plot to use the clergy to attack the Baha’is as a proxy strike against the Americans, in order to scare them away from investing in Iran. The ghost of the Imbrie Affair,¹⁶¹ which was interpreted as a similar British ploy, was frequently invoked to support this theory, as was the contemporary awareness that the British had traditionally worked through the ulama and that they have traditionally been unwilling to share Iran.

Declassified British and American documents make it clear that the British were not behind the pogrom and that the rumors that they were did not originate with either Power. According to Entezam, these rumors of British authorship “bore all the marks of being spread deliberately; perhaps by some of our alleged friends who were disgruntled.”¹⁶² When asked more about the source of the rumors that the British were behind the campaign, Entezam speculated that the ulama themselves started the rumor in order to use it as a shield and exploit the government’s confusion and hesitancy to act against British interests.

¹⁶¹ For the Imbrie Affair, see Appendix III.

¹⁶² TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 20 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Stevens, May 25, 1955.

It seems, however, that the Iranian government itself was the chief proponent of the view that the anti-Baha'i pogrom was a British plot, via the ulama. This British explanation was promoted in the official and semi-official press and was deliberately fed to foreign diplomats and informants through ministers, governors, generals, and others in the state apparatus. It is not entirely clear when this strategy was adopted, how far up this policy originated, what exactly it hoped to achieve, or if it was done consciously or out of habit. The Iranian governments' habit of blaming the British when things went wrong was (and indeed still is) almost a political reflex during the modern period. Certainly, the British were directly responsible for many of Iran's problems, but blaming them when they were actually *not* involved was (and is) a mark of a desperate regime trying to save face by scapegoating the one group more despised than the Baha'is.

Blaming the "mortal struggle" between the British and the Americans for the pogrom allowed the government to evade culpability while simultaneously allowing it to avoid publicly blaming the ulama directly. The British explanation also had the benefit of pushing the Americans and the British into a rivalry that could be exploited, and of confusing the general public enough to allow the government the wiggle room needed to abandon the pogrom, on nationalist grounds, without appearing to be sympathetic towards the Baha'is.

The stories of British authorship led to reports of a "conflict of emotions" among the masses, who were theoretically supportive of attacking the Baha'is, but at the same time were wary of being used, yet again, by the British.¹⁶³ Both American and British sources report that whenever they told Iranians that the rumors were false, and that America and Britain were actually on the same page regarding Iran and had no intentions

¹⁶³ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 1: 9.

of starting a new “Great Game” over it, this was “received with polite skepticism” and the Iranian would “smile incredulously at them and think they are naïve.”¹⁶⁴

According to American consular reports in Mashhad, sources began feeding them the theory that Falsafi was paid to attack the Baha’is by the British in order to attack “American influence in Iran.”¹⁶⁵ The promotion of the British angle seems to have been government-originated, and it was picked up by the military and the press and repeated until it stuck. Governor Masudi, for example, tried to convince the Americans that the anti-Baha’i “commotion” was the first “open evidence” of American-British rivalry since Britain’s return to Iran after the coup.¹⁶⁶ Official support for the British theory can also be seen, for example, in the May 19 and 20 editions of *Aftab-e Sharq*, which repeat the accusations against the British. This paper was owned by a recent Director of Press and Propaganda and known to express the government’s point of view.¹⁶⁷

The *Aftab-e Sharq* articles begin with stock denunciations of the Baha’is as a “misguided sect.” They are then described as “like Tudeh,” i.e. a political group and one that was not merely a heresy within Shi’ism, but rather a political heresy that caused offense to the nation and to all Iranians. The campaign is then framed as a British “economic” plot to regain their oil monopoly and it is claimed that opposing the external Other—the British—is more important than giving in to the desire to attack the internal Other—the Baha’is—since this would only further the British agenda and their hold on Iran. In the author’s view:

¹⁶⁴ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 21 / 55, Stevens to FO, May 26, 1955.

¹⁶⁵ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 1: 6.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 6.

We feel it necessary to emphasize that the Sect is a misguided one which, like the Tudeh Party, has led the people astray and hindered the development of this country. We feel that Bahaism should be resolutely rejected by all Iranians... [But] the British Government has for years, even centuries, carried out a policy of ensuring that Iran remains weak and her people reduced to misery. It has always maneuvered to prevent any other power from gaining influence in this country... Since the 28th of Mordad, 1953 [i.e. the coup], the British have had to pretend to cooperate with the United States in order to get back into Iran.¹⁶⁸

The British were said to have initiated the “dangerous game” of anti-Baha’i violence because they were desperate to maintain their oil monopoly and limit further American influence, as part of their plan to do “everything possible to keep Iran weak and undeveloped.”¹⁶⁹ To achieve these ends, they were willing to use their concealed “trump cards,” which they saved until the final stages of the game, and “One of these trumps is the Baha’i controversy.”¹⁷⁰ As part of their sinister plan, they craftily chose Ramadan as the scene and “poisoned the devout mind of Mullah Falsafi and saw to it that he spoke out against the Baha’is.”¹⁷¹ If Falsafi was sincere in his beliefs, then they were manipulated by the British for their own good to ensure that they “suddenly erupted” at a politically opportune moment.¹⁷²

The articles further discuss how this supposed British intrigue placed the government in the unenviable position of having to undo this foreign meddling without giving the false impression that it was taking the side of the Baha’is. According to the author, he was with Falsafi when he received a phone call warning him that “foreign elements” were behind the campaign and that he would be held personally accountable for any further violence that he might incite. The article then quotes foreign press

¹⁶⁸ *Aftab-e Sharq*, May 19 & 20, 1955 [quoted in USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 1: 11-13].

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

accounts to make the case that the anti-Baha'i campaign was discouraging further American investment in Iran. "It is evident from this item," the article claims, "that the religious aspect of this crisis is secondary to the economic one."¹⁷³ It concludes with the warning that next the British will try the same move with other minorities such as the Jews, but that security chief General Bakhtiar was actively at work preventing this.¹⁷⁴

Falsafi claimed that the Iranian government was manipulated by the British through their Baha'i agents, and that this was why a pogrom against the Baha'is was necessary. In this semi-official article, however, the government makes the counter-claim that Falsafi and the clergy are the ones duped and manipulated by the British, and that is why the pogrom should be *stopped*. In both scenarios the puppet master is the same, with the arguments differing primarily over whose strings were being pulled. Both arguments are patriotic and appeal to nationalism and xenophobia, but these forces were oriented differently in each case. The government's intent seems to have been to cause confusion and doubt among patriotic Iranians in the hope that, not knowing whether they were assisting the British or not, most would choose inaction and enthusiasm for the issue would fade.

In Isfahan, for example, it was widely felt that the pogrom was not really religious in origin but, rather, that the "Hidden Hand" of the British was the true architect of the violence, to scare away America and reclaim their position as the preeminent Power in Iran. According to the American consulate in Isfahan, it was commonly believed that

the U.S. is the natural supporter of the Baha'is since a minority of this faith exists in America; therefore, the British are said to feel that an Iranian attack on the Baha'is is indirectly but unmistakably an attack on the Americans, which will

¹⁷³ Ibid., 13.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

diminish American influence and pave the way for a firmer British hold on Iran.¹⁷⁵

American observers had difficulty understanding what they saw as the “common Iranian psychosis concerning the British ‘Hidden Hand.’” Mahmud Rais, the head of Bank Melli, attempted to explain the Iranian attitude to the Mashhad consulate. He said that, unlike the Russians, the British ruled by playing religious and ethnic groups off of each other and conflict and contention was their bread and butter. According to Rais, one could not understand the effects of this and the “icy contempt” that the British had for native peoples unless one was Iranian or from a British colony. “The Russians may have been just as treacherous as the British,” he claimed, “but they never managed to humiliate the Iranians in quite the same way... being a proud people, we Iranians resent their attitude deeply.” It was felt that, “As a people whose national pride amounts at times to arrogance, the Iranians have been made to feel ashamed of themselves by the English, whose sense of superiority amounts sometimes to contempt.”¹⁷⁶ According to Rais, since the return of the British after the coup, they were employing the “same old mullahs” and, in his view, the stirring up of anti-Baha’ism was just part of this larger process of regaining what was lost because of Mosaddeq (i.e. an oil monopoly and unrivaled influence).

In Mashhad, Governor-General Ram shared a similar interpretation of events, saying that the British have “always worked through the Shia clergy” and that they had “reopened their channels with the mullas as soon as they returned to Iran.” Ram spoke of

¹⁷⁵ USDS, *Iraq, 1955-1959*, Reel 15:141.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 1:260.

the anti-Baha'i campaign as a British plot and claimed that "everybody" knew that many of the top ayatollahs were on the British payroll, such as Ayatollah Kufai.¹⁷⁷

The popular distrust of the concordance between the major Western Powers vis-à-vis Iran was perhaps best exemplified by General Vaseqi's August speech, promoted by the director of Press and Propaganda, in which he highlighted that "two foreign powers...with bloody hands" had "always sought to keep Iran impoverished" and had fought each other to do this, only collaborating to "cut up the corpse."¹⁷⁸

By promoting the idea that the anti-Baha'i pogrom created by the Shah and Borujerdi was actually a British plot, the government was able to frame its rejection of the pogrom in nationalist terms, as a rejection of British interference in internal affairs. This framing of the issue also had the added benefit of discouraging an American withdrawal of faith and investment, as this would be framed as a sign of weakness and concession vis-à-vis the British.

Conclusion

The anti-Baha'i pogrom of 1955 is a multivalent symbol, rich in ambiguity and contradictions, and not limited to any single reading or interpretation. Those who conducted the pogrom are framed as the embodiment of the nation, the forces of medievalism, savages, animals, the archetypal return of the enemies of previous religions, and stooges of the British. At the same time the targets of the pogrom are framed as national apostates, a contagious disease, demons, weeds, the progressive part of the nation, Christian analogues, tragic heroes recreating cyclic patterns of religious history,

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

and proxies for America. Nationalist rhetoric is used both to spur on the pogrom against the fifth column within, and to taint the entire pogrom as an imperial ruse. Imagery from nature is used to naturalize violence against the Baha'is as a national reflex of the citizenry, but is also used to cast Muslims as dangerous, primordial, and uncivilized, in need of firm discipline to bend them to civility.

Throughout the various readings, the most common element is the disavowal of agency: the clerical discourse speaks of the involuntary, natural reactions of the citizenry; the diplomatic literature portrays the “fanatics” behind the pogrom as only doing what they are naturally inclined to do when not properly restrained; the Baha'i literature sees the “forces of darkness” as a concomitant to the “forces of light,” fated and part of a larger plan; and the government's attribution of authorship to the British “Hidden Hand” works to remove local agency, relegating Iranians to pieces in games fought by all-powerful, external powers.

In the aftermath of the 1955 pogrom, the two readings that are most important are the clerical discourse on authority and the American framing of the issue as a failure to adequately restrain Islam. The following chapter explores the outcome of the clash between clerical authority claims and American intervention to rollback the post-1941 Shi'ite resurgence.

CHAPTER VII

“Completely Cowed”: Britain, America, and the Making of Shi’ite Nationalism in Iran, 1955-1959

Introduction

In my previous treatment of the anti-Baha’i pogrom of 1955 as “object lesson,” I have explored the idea that one of the main goals of the pogrom was that Baha’is must be put back “in their place.” That is to say, it was hoped that Baha’is would be returned to subsisting in the margins as an underground group, or would be removed from Iran completely. In the previous chapter, I discussed how this campaign against the Baha’is’ entry into the public sphere—as an “out” and increasingly integrated community—led to Shi’ism’s entry into the public sphere in ways that the government and its foreign patrons found disturbing and unacceptable. This led to an intense confrontation between the clergy and the state, which can be considered the most significant clerical challenge to the monarchy in twenty years,¹ since Reza Shah’s bloody 1935 confrontation in Mashhad.²

The Shah’s British and American patrons interpreted the ulama’s political activism, and the bold re-assertion of Shi’ism into the public realm, through the Orientalist frames discussed in the previous chapter, seeing their “savage” and irrational

¹ Yes, Ayatollah Kashani mounted a challenge to the Shah before this that was more serious in many ways, but I am speaking in terms of the corporate actions of the clerical hierarchy.

² See Appendix II.

“medievalism” as a threat to Iran’s security and ability to modernize. This chapter addresses the British and American intervention in Iran, in the aftermath of 1955, in order to undo the problem of “political Islam” and to keep the clergy “in their place.”

It should be noted that although these chapters ostensibly deal with the pogrom against the Baha’i minority and its aftermath, it is clear that, for the groups actively involved in this contestation (i.e. the clerics and combatant Islamic Associations on the one hand, and the Anglo-American opposition to them on the other), Baha’ism is largely a MacGuffin used to push ahead other agendas. What is really at stake is the nature of the state and who has the authority to determine its orientation. For the proponents of the anti-Baha’i pogrom, Iran’s unmarked national identity is and forever should be Shi’ite, with divergent identities either subsumed within Shi’ism (as with the recognized minorities) or “weeded out,” as in the case of Baha’ism, which has been considered irreconcilable with mainstream Shi’ite doxa.³ From the American perspective, however, it was the progressive Baha’i minority—along with other similarly-characterized secular or religiously moderate Iranians in the educated middle class—who were the real Iran, or at least should be.⁴ The ulama and their supporters were seen as relics of the Arab invasion—which was believed to have destroyed the glory of Iran’s pre-Islamic empires—and were marked as “foreign” and considered incompatible with Iran’s new modernity, and in need of strict repression and discipline. The Shah was tasked with this duty from May 1955 onwards.

³ For the “othered” nature of all things marked as “Baha’i,” see Mottahedeh, *Representing the Unrepresentable*.

⁴ See, for example, W. Smith Murray, “A Consideration of the Bahai Religion” (*Documents on the Shaykhi, Babi and Baha’i Movements*, Vol. 1, no. 2 (1997). Accessed February 2, 2011. <http://www.h-net.org/~bahai/docs/smith25.htm>). This diplomatic report dismisses the national potential of Islam, since it is “foreign,” and suggests that the Baha’i religion, which is both progressive and “pure Persian,” would be the “best solution” for Iran.

The chaos of the anti-Baha'i pogrom, and the resulting negative publicity in the international press, collapsed any Anglo-American confidence in the Shah's experiment with "direct rule," which had begun earlier in 1955. There were, however, no viable alternatives to the Shah, so the decision was made to give the young Shah the opportunity to prove himself by addressing the clerical question. The continued relevance of the Shah, as well as incentives such as future military aid, were made contingent on his demonstration of resolve in maintaining order and preventing the occurrence of future outbreaks of "Muslim" violence against the Baha'is. It was hoped that the Shah would grow into a responsible autocrat, since the British felt that "Iran as a republic would be horrible to contemplate."⁵

This chapter will show how a limited humanitarian intervention expanded into foreign micro-management of Iran's internal religious policy. I suggest that this intervention resulted in three significant developments that decisively influenced the shape of the decades that followed. First, it led to the imposition of an anti-clerical campaign and agenda that permanently broke the Court-clergy symbiosis, which had traditionally been the lynchpin of the Iranian polity. Second, this repression and betrayal of the clergy led to the early articulation of a politically autonomous Shi'ite nationalism, which expressed the desire to replace the Shah with Islamic rule. And finally, Iran's initially scant intelligence and security apparatus was forced to expand and become more efficient and organized as part of the effort to discipline the clergy and prevent a repeat of the "surprise" of 1955. This bureaucratization evolved into SAVAK (Iran's notoriously brutal secret police) and fed into the Shah's growing reliance on security forces to compensate for his lack of a political base.

⁵ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 120713.

A note on sources

Clerical sources are largely vague or silent about the anti-clerical campaign of the late 1950s, as are other important Persian-language memoirs, such as that of Asadollah Alam.⁶ Alam's silence can perhaps be attributed to the fact that his diary entries do not begin until more than a dozen years after these events, but the clerical silence—or rather impenetrable vagueness—is harder to explain, especially when it comes to those like Falsafi, who were directly targeted and whose extensive memoir covers this period.⁷ Falsafi does refer to Ayatollah Borujerdi's anger at the Shah's reversal on the Baha'i issue, and he mentions Borujerdi's resulting alienation from the government (discussed in depth in the next chapter), but there is no discussion of the details of the anti-clerical campaign that followed the anti-Baha'i pogrom.⁸ Falsafi only breaks from his vagaries and oblique references in a section that relates an occasion when General Bakhtiar supposedly acted cowed in the presence of Ayatollah Borujerdi (which is ironic given the events discussed below). In this apocryphal account, Borujerdi “angrily commanded: ‘Sit on the ground!’ and Bakhtiar immediately sat on the ground.”⁹

In his lengthy study of Islamic movements in this period, Rasul Jafarian is likewise silent on the specifics of anti-clerical actions that followed the anti-Baha'i pogrom. He, for example, has an extensive discussion of Ayatollah Nureddin Shirazi that includes no discussion of the incident in which government troops fired upon Shirazi and his supporters following their attack on a Baha'i holy site, or the harsh treatment, exile,

⁶ Alam, *Yaddashtha-ye Alam*.

⁷ Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi*.

⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 208-10.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 211.

and interrogation that he received after this episode.¹⁰ I do not mention this as a criticism of Jafarian's encyclopedic survey, but rather as an example of how even the most extensive Persian-language studies are silent on the specifics of anti-clericalism in this period, although they do refer to it in general terms. This can be explained by the silences in the extant primary sources.

There are several factors which likely contributed to the silence and guarded words in clerical memoirs. First, as will be shown below, the government employed a top-down approach to disciplining the clergy, forcing senior Ayatollahs to discipline those under them to force their compliance with the regime's instructions. This is relevant because it was the senior clerics at the time that would have directly experienced many of the interventions discussed in the British and American sources, and these elderly individuals did not live long enough to participate in the post-Revolution memoir phenomenon. Furthermore, the junior and mid-level clerics who did go on to write after the Revolution may have had no idea that the senior ulama were coerced into compliance and may have seen their actions as attributable to quietism or royalism. If they did know what happened, they could not address the mechanics of what occurred without explicitly implicating their mentors in collusion, cowardice, or worse. Another consideration is that the Revolutionary and post-Revolutionary milieu in Iran perceives shame in "passive" victimhood, such as occurred in the post-1955 years, while glorifying the supposedly steadfast revolutionary stance of Khomeini from 1963 onwards. As such, teleological approaches to this period jump from the oppositional activities of Safavi and Kashani in the early 1950s to Khomeini's opposition to the government in 1962/3, explaining away the intervening decade as an aberration in the march to revolution—caused by

¹⁰ Jafarian, *Jaryanha va Sazmanha-ye Mazhabi-Siasi-e Iran*, pp. 113-23.

Borujerdi's old-fashioned quietism—because of an inability to admit to being victimized without resisting in a way that would be considered sufficient according to later standards.

In addition to the silences in the clerical memoirs covering this period, there was no discussion of the anti-clerical campaign in the government-controlled press of the time.¹¹ Likewise, the Iranian archives for this period continue to be closed to independent research. Even if this was not the case, in the initial period being discussed Iranian record keeping of the anti-clerical campaign was inconsistent, at best, since General Bakhtiar was an intelligence czar who lacked both an adequate support staff and adequate filing space for many years (as discussed below). He also liked to keep sensitive files in his personal possession and, following the Shah's split with Bakhtiar in 1961, it is not clear that SAVAK inherited all of these files. It is possible that, for certain events in the late 1950s, British and American accounts are the only ones that have survived.

This is all speculation, but silence does not need to be satisfactorily explained in order for it to be significant or for it to confirm the occurrence of significant events. A prolonged period of silence and vagaries, accompanied by a profound shift in culture and the permanent collapse of the Court-clergy symbiosis, suggests that several significant events transpired in this period. As Piya Chatterjee points out, “conscious silences,” although “frustrating,” are nevertheless useful measures of significant resistance, and are the result of the “solidarities created by a common [social] experience.”¹²

¹¹ For a discussion of state censorship on this issue, see Chapter VI.

¹² Piya Chatterjee, *A Time for Tea: Women, Labor, and Post/Colonial Politics on an Indian Plantation* (London: Duke University Press, 2001), pp. 237, 250.

In terms of selective amnesia in Iranian historiography, Afsaneh Najmabadi has demonstrated—with the example of the effacement of the “Daughters of Quchan” from later Iranian historiography—that the grand narratives of ideological histories cannot accept episodes that threaten the foundational premises on which their ideology rests. She notes that “It is precisely the overwhelming presence of the story... that may account for its disappearance,” since admitting the importance of a foundational trauma could undo the myths upon which an ideology rests. Small narrative discrepancies can be included and explained away, but large and defining traumas would “have threatened to take over the grand narrative” and “occupy the overall meaning of the revolution.”¹³

Despite the silence or vagaries of the Persian sources, the British and American archives leave no doubt that an anti-clerical campaign occurred in the late 1950s, as it is clearly, consistently, and explicitly discussed, over a period of years, by dozens of writers, in both the British and American archives. Obviously, these reports can and do suffer from bias, and an exploration of repression from the perspective of the aggressor is undesirable for a variety of reasons. As such, this chapter represents a preliminary intervention based on archival sources and it will hopefully spur further studies.

The Moharram holocaust that wasn't

The first test for the Shah, presented by his British and American patrons, was to force Borujerdi to acquiesce to the end of the pogrom and discipline those under his authority to prevent further disorder. As discussed in Chapter V, this was achieved in a rather ham-handed way, through a series of compromises, threats, and vacuous attempts at

¹³ Afsaneh Najmabadi, *The Story of the Daughters of Quchan: Gender and National Memory in Iranian History* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1998), pp. 179-80.

placation. Nevertheless, the pogrom was reigned in well before the end of Ramadan (May 22) and the matter was mostly resolved, apart from Borujerdi's legislative challenge and scattered, abortive regional challenges between then and the beginning of the holy month of Moharram (August 20 – September 18).

The second test concerned the Shah's ability to prevent a renewal of anti-Baha'i agitation during Moharram. This planned second wave was announced before the end of the Ramadan pogrom but, unlike the former pogrom, it was said to be primarily concerned with massacring Baha'is rather than simply evicting them from positions of wealth and power. Reports of this planned violence can be traced to Iranian Baha'is' reports that they had suffered widespread taunting about massacres to come, during Moharram. The Baha'i lobbying efforts to prevent this development framed it as a coming "Holocaust."¹⁴

This scenario became effectively impossible, however, after Borujerdi was forced to grudgingly agree to prevent further anti-Baha'i agitation in exchange for the face-saving gesture of Alam's (mostly hollow) promises to dismiss Baha'is employed by the government. Still, although Borujerdi was considered a "universal" *marja'*, his influence was actually far from universal, and there were individuals and groups who acted contrary to his directives. As discussed in Chapter V, these included Ayatollah Shirazi's rogue attempt to demolish the House of the Bab, despite Borujerdi's order for calm, and the massacre of Baha'is in Hormuzak, possibly with the involvement of the largely autonomous Feda'iyān-e Islam. Rogue actors could engage in Moharram violence despite Borujerdi's agreement to calm, although without the support of the government or

¹⁴ See, for example, USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 366.

Borujerdi such action would be limited in scope and would certainly not amount to a “Holocaust.”

The possibility of autonomous action was heightened because it does not seem that Borujerdi was ever the driving force behind this second wave. As discussed previously, the Grand Ayatollah saw Communism as more dangerous than Baha’ism, but nevertheless said that he would never issue a *fatwa* for the mass killing of Tudeh supporters, because this would lead to a bloodbath.¹⁵ He believed that Muslims had the right to kill Baha’is—and he would defend the right of any who did so not to suffer any penalty for this, since he believed Baha’is were *mahdur ad-damm* (i.e. their blood could be spilled with impunity under Islamic law)—but he was not interested in personally presiding over mass killings. This was against his personality. If anything, the *postponement* of violence until a hypothetical second wave seems like the sort of compromise that would be in keeping with Borujerdi’s character, delaying some factions’ desire for violence so as not to confuse the issue and hinder his push for anti-Baha’i legislation during Ramadan. If this is indeed the case, and this second wave did not even originate with Borujerdi, then this would further increase the likelihood of autonomous action during Moharram, with or without Borujerdi. Thus, in many ways the holy month was as much a test for Borujerdi as it was for the Shah, since the persistence of autonomous clerical action, along the lines of Shirazi’s mob action in Shiraz, would damage the Grand Ayatollah’s authority by throwing further into doubt his authority as universal *marja’*.

“A danger signal” for the British

¹⁵ See Chapter II.

The stakes were significantly higher for the Shah than they were for Borujerdi. Less than two years after the CIA-sponsored coup that restored him to power, he risked a loss of patronage and the creeping specter of regime change, due to his failure to maintain order and his inability to discipline the clergy. Despite these stakes, according to Alam, the Shah was initially slow to turn against the clerics, and was only half-hearted in this, until he personally witnessed the anti-Baha'i mobs of Ayatollah Shirazi's Brotherhood Party, which took to the streets while he was in Shiraz at the end of May. These demonstrations had been orchestrated by Shirazi to occur during the Shah's visit and the Brothers were rather transparently using the Baha'is as a proxy target in what was really a political demonstration against the Shah himself, for abandoning the anti-Baha'i cause.¹⁶ The Foreign Minister (Entezam) also confirmed privately that the Shah "had returned from Shiraz determined to resist further demands by the mullahs,"¹⁷

Alam informed Stevens (the British ambassador) that, after witnessing this frightening spectacle, the Shah "now realized that a great mistake had been made in encouraging the mullahs to agitate against the Bahais and it had been decided that from henceforth the mullahs were going to be opposed and Government was going on to offensive action against them."¹⁸ According to the Stevens, Alam asked

how far I thought they should go in that direction—a question which I managed to avoid answering... I asked him what measures for countering the influence of the mullahs he had in mind. He said that every request they made such as for the removal of Bahais from high posts would from now onwards be refused and that he intended to be rough with them personally, making exception only of Borujerdi who was a wise man.¹⁹

¹⁶ This episode is also discussed in Chapter V.

¹⁷ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 25/ 55, Confidential Minutes by Stevens, June 1, 1955.

¹⁸ Ibid., Confidential Minutes by Stevens, May 31, 1955.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Alam seemed fully aware that the crackdown on the clergy “might land them in some trouble,” but also “appeared fully to recognize that it was essential to crack down on the mullahs at this stage if they were not to obtain too much power and threaten the position of the Shah and the Government.” Stevens approved of the new stance by the Shah and Alam, seeing it as a commitment to Iran’s Western-aligned future and a rejection of the “medieval.” In his view:

it was impossible for anyone, including the Iranian Government, to move in two directions at the same time, and if they wanted to engage in a programme of development and reform which might be called Westernization, although they might not like the phrase, it would not be consistent to return to religious intolerance and medieval ways.²⁰

Alam agreed with every point.

Despite the government’s willingness to orient itself as instructed, and to discipline the “medieval,” there were ongoing doubts about the Shah’s lack of potential and his inability to become a dictator, along the lines of Reza Shah, an evolution which the British felt was needed in order to maintain order and discipline the clergy. According to a June report by Stevens, members of the Iranian elite were also increasingly concerned about the Shah’s direct rule, since they also believed that “he has neither the temperament of a dictator nor the constructive and administrative capacity to provide a driving force behind a puppet Government.”²¹ In Stevens’s view, the government’s mishandling of the anti-Baha’i pogrom was the main reason for the lack of faith in the Shah, but he believed that the subsequent confrontation with the clergy would prove a more telling indicator of the regime’s future prospects. In his view,

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

The Baha'i affair was a danger signal; we are only too well aware of the Shah's failings anyhow... The really depressing factor is accumulating evidence of a curious combination of weakness and overconfidence on the part of the Shah; this, if maintained is bound to lead to growing opposition and in all probability to eventual disorders... [but] the situation is capable of correction... [and] there is some fairly good evidence that the Shah is showing firmness towards the Mullahs.²²

A number of interesting observations were made in passing in Stevens's analysis of the Shah's state of mind. Among them, it was noted that despite the growing disquiet over the ineptness of his attempt at direct rule, the Shah appeared entirely unaware that his "wire-pulling must be more cunningly concealed," "seemed extraordinarily unconcerned—indeed almost pleased—at the prospect of a bedridden Prime Minister," and recklessly demoted capable individuals out of "jealousy and mistrust." The most striking moment came, however, in a discussion of how best to exert influence in Iran. Stevens expressed a personal preference for a "compact and closely-knit embassy" and criticized the bloated network of spies and informants utilized prior to the ending of diplomatic relations during the Mosaddeq period. The Shah could not grasp this attitude, saying that the British were wrong to abandon this shadowy network of agents, since it was useful and "it made us feared."²³ Here we see that the Shah, from the very first challenge during his direct rule, exhibited the traits that would characterize his regime until the Revolution, namely confidence built upon a profound lack of self-awareness, coupled with a penchant for using intelligence networks to rule through fear.

Perhaps more than the "failings" of the Shah himself, the British were concerned about Alam, who was the Shah's chief advisor at the time, to the point that when one spoke of Iran's "government" what was really meant was "the Shah under the inspiration

²² Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 27/ 55, Stevens to FO, June 8, 1955.

²³ Ibid.

of Alam.” Despite his Anglophile reputation, the British considered him good-intentioned but incompetent, too young (mid-thirties), inexperienced, amateurish, stupid, and constantly ill-prepared to deal with strong opposition. Alam was the cabinet member most on-board with the British turn against the clergy, and was hailed as “full of reforming zeal” and praised for wanting “to take firmer action against the mullas than some of his senior colleagues,” but he was also denounced as “a trimmer [flip-flopper] by nature” and one who “failed to carry his point.”²⁴

Alam was the only member of Cabinet who pushed for anti-clerical action beyond that which had been imposed by the British and the Americans. He was, however, unwilling to make a stand without soliciting explicit British support, and took advantage of his reputation as “a British stooge” to lend imperial weight to his own agenda, often with mixed results.²⁵ On the morning after the Shiraz Massacre, for example, Alam sent a representative to meet with the British and ask for their support for his position on the matter, since the Cabinet was divided over how to punish Ayatollah Shirazi. Alam had put his career on the line and demanded that strong action be taken if he was not to resign. To support his position, he hurriedly sent a representative to solicit explicit British support, in such haste that the representative arrived out of breath. The British response was supportive of Alam’s side of the debate, but was deliberately vague and did not give Alam the explicit backing he had hoped for, instead calling for action implicitly by warning the Shah that “it was impossible for Persia to move in two directions at once

²⁴ Ibid., FO 371 / 114810 / EP 1018 / 24, Stevens to FO, July 13, 1955.

²⁵ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 2 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Fearnley, May 17, 1955.

and the process of Westernization accorded ill with giving head to religious fanaticism.”²⁶

This internal governmental confusion over how to discipline and punish the clergy caused Ambassador Stevens to question whether, “as a result of the Baha’i troubles” the Shah’s “lack of decisiveness” was too big of a liability and if “in the last resort this Government can be relied upon to maintain order.”²⁷ The most important issue for the Foreign Office was not minority rights, but rather the pressing need for the Shah to develop the iron fist of his father and to use it to prevent conservative forces from pulling the nation “backwards.” Stevens had been previously informed by the Foreign Office that, although the violence presented “a rather disquieting picture,” it was as an “opportunity” to educate the Iranian government on the need to discipline the clergy. It was observed that “The influence of the mullahs, which [Reza Shah] suppressed so effectively with machine guns at Meshad, has always been exerted against any form of progress and its re-emergence would be in the interests neither of Persia nor of ourselves.”²⁸

As Lord Reading explained in an August meeting with Iran’s Foreign Minister (Entezam), the nature of British concern was not over the suppression of this “cult,” but rather over the fact that the suppression was initiated by the ulama—as opposed to the state—since clerical influence “was almost always reactionary” and they should not be encouraged, since a single success might lead the ulama “to further and probably damaging interference in the political field.” Entezam agreed that clerical influence was

²⁶ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 36 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Stevens, June 28, 1955.

²⁷ Ibid., FO 371 / 114810 / EP 1018 / 24, Stevens to FO, July 13, 1955.

²⁸ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 19 / 55, FO to Stevens, May 20, 1955.

typically negative and committed himself to giving strict orders to prevent clerical disruption of public order.²⁹

“A test of strength”

The American embassy considered the sporadic, regional agitation against Baha'is during the summer of 1955 to be a “continuing campaign” that was being used by the ulama as a lever with which to regain the social importance that they wielded before Reza Shah's reign, and that in the pursuit of this target they “will take advantage of any weakness or vacillation shown by the government.”³⁰ By the end of July, Secretary of State Dulles judged the Shah's inability to satisfactorily control the ulama and completely halt any and all clerical agitation as “continuing evidence” that the government was “unable or unwilling to control fanaticism” and, as such, it was felt that there was a high likelihood of a new “outbreak” of violence during Moharram.³¹

To prevent this eventuality, Secretary of State Dulles instructed the American embassy to inform the Shah that continued governmental “timidity” vis-à-vis the ulama, especially outside of the capital, would only “encourage fanatical elements whose objectives are antithetical to the announced program of the Shah and Government.” He further instructed the embassy to threaten the Shah by warning him that Iran's clamp down on the ulama was “especially important in connection [with continued American] aid programs for Iran.” After warning the Shah, they were to observe his response and inform the Department whether or not the Iranian government was able to “assert its

²⁹ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 41 / 55, FO to Wright, August 5, 1955.

³⁰ USDS, *Iraq, 1955-1959*, Reel 15: 147.

³¹ Ibid., *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 1:168.

authority firmly.”³² Throughout the summer, the Americans continued to express “great concern” and made “strong representations” to the Shah about the need to take more forceful action to restrain the clergy.³³ According to American Consul Gordon King, the Moharram period would serve as a test for the Shah, to see if he would rise to the occasion, or remain “weak and vacillating.”³⁴

Despite Iranian assurances that they had “taken extreme precautions,” the protection of the Baha’is and suppression of the clergy received “almost daily attention in the Department of State.”³⁵ Tehran assured the Department that after their representations “in strong terms” about how Iranian-American relations were at stake, the Shah had made “specific assurances” to take a “strong stand.” The Embassy cautioned, however, that the actions of both the international Baha’i lobby and the State Department itself were perhaps counter-productive. They highlighted the Shah’s complete cooperation and compliance with all instructions in this matter and suggested that Washington perhaps temporarily lessen the constant pressure over the Baha’i issue, as such unnecessary nagging was likely to cause annoyance and be counter-productive. They further relayed that the Shah “feared” that the international Baha’i lobby would make the task of controlling the ulama harder for him.³⁶

As Moharram approached, Prime Minister Ala assured the American government that Falsafi would be forcefully dispatched on a “pilgrimage” abroad during the holy month, that he was no longer a concern, and that his government

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 380.

³⁴ Ibid., Reel 24: 335-36.

³⁵ Ibid., 371.

³⁶ Ibid., 371, 374.

has both the ability and intent to assert its authority to suppress in its early stages any anti-Baha'i violence that might threaten public order... [It] genuinely intends to terminate the persecution, being well aware of the difficult position in which the campaign has placed it. Nevertheless the government was not ready to appear in the role of the protector of the Bahais, an attitude which it considers would be politically suicidal.³⁷

Falsafi, besides being forced to leave Iran during Moharram, had also received a call from General Bakhtiar in which he "in extremely strong language... in the sort of terms in which one would address a servant" told Falsafi that ten clerics imprisoned at the time would stay in prison and that if there were any more "nonsense" then Falsafi would join them.³⁸ Falsafi was also blacklisted from state media and the government chose an apolitical, pro-regime preacher to replace the "Bahai-baiting" cleric on state radio broadcasts during the holy month of Moharram.³⁹

Although Ala and Entezam were confident in their ability to suppress dissent, others shared the view of Jahanshah Saleh (the Minister of Health) that the Shah's new anti-clerical attitude was a curious mixture of "actions involving strong-arm methods coupled with appeasement and yielding under pressure." Saleh privately ridiculed the Shah's inability to "carry through a firm course of action" and "deal firmly" with the ulama. To support his charges, he gave the example of two clerics from Borujerd who were taken away for anti-Baha'i activities but, after strong public protest, were returned in a cowardly fashion, by dropping them off in the street in the middle of the night.⁴⁰

This fickleness was an exception however, and in general the provincial leadership was far more consistent and rigid in their enforcement of the new policies. In Gorveh, for example, Sheikh Hadi Najafabadi distributed a great deal of anti-Baha'i

³⁷ Ibid., Reel 1: 176.

³⁸ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 26 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Stephens, June 6, 1955.

³⁹ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 4: 638.

⁴⁰ Ibid., Reel 1: 122.

literature and was arrested by the military, stripped of his propaganda and sent away to be detained in Tehran. In other areas, security troops had “arrested and expelled to remote areas of Iran several Mullahs who disregarded government cautions.”⁴¹

The American insistence that Moharram would be a “test of strength with the mullahs,” had been fully taken to heart by the Shah, who made full preparations for the implementation of martial law, even in the provinces, and swore that his government would not allow any serious disturbances.⁴² The Americans were further assured that “government will brook no incitement to disturbances on the part of the Mullahs.” Nevertheless, the Embassy felt that, although the security forces could control the cities, there were not adequate rural police to prevent disorder in the country areas if there was renewed violence, since many of the lower-ranking police and military officers were sympathetic to the ulama’s cause and the Shah, when called upon to employ decisive public violence, might vacillate again.⁴³

Moharram begins

In a meeting on August 23, several days after Moharram began without incident, the Shah met with the American Ambassador [Chapin] and pathetically confessed that “incalculable damage” had been done and “a great mistake had been made” in allowing the pogrom earlier in the year, but that “Falsafi had not played fair.”⁴⁴ Now, however, he claimed that he had taken a “strong stand in the matter” and that the situation was “ameliorating every month” because “firm instructions had gone out throughout the

⁴¹ Ibid., 48.

⁴² Ibid., Reel 9: 331.

⁴³ Ibid., Reel 4: 640-41.

⁴⁴ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 43 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Wright, August 23, 1955.

country to the local authorities” and “Government was prepared if necessary to take disciplinary measures against Moslem clergy should they attempt to excite people against Bahais.”⁴⁵ Chapin expressed his pleasure at this stand, noting that “there would inevitably be repercussions abroad if there were to be disturbances against the Baha’is.”⁴⁶

In the following weeks, it was observed that there was order, but that anger was building beneath the superficial calm. In response to this anger, Borujerdi continued to push hard for non-violent action against the Baha’is, which would not technically violate his agreement to prevent violence during Moharram. He called for Baha’is to be completely shunned to the point that Muslims have no relations of any kind with them. As part of this effort, there was an attempt to carry out an economic boycott against the Baha’is, which included a prohibition from buying or selling to them. Despite Borujerdi’s best efforts, however, there was little national interest in the boycott, although there was scattered regional participation, at least temporarily. Even in places like Najafabad, where participation in the boycott was strong, Baha’is reported that sympathetic Muslims would buy food for them and help them to get around the boycott in other ways.⁴⁷

For the most part, the government was able to maintain peace in Moharram through the use of an “iron fist” approach not seen since the days of Reza Shah. In Azerbaijan, for example, the police and military were in effect to an unprecedented degree, despite the province’s earlier apathy towards the pogrom. Every Ashura

⁴⁵ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 1: 239.

⁴⁶ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 43 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Wright, August 23, 1955.

⁴⁷ NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 16 / 04 / Box 141 / Folder 570.3 –Isfahan Consulate to American Embassy, September 7, 1955.

procession⁴⁸ was placed under police and military supervision and soldiers lined every route. This, obviously, had a “depressing effect” on religious enthusiasm, and sermons were described as being as bland and passionless as the processions, absolutely lacking any mention of the Baha’i issue. This had been achieved because the ulama in Azerbaijan, and indeed in every provincial area, had been “sternly cautioned” by the security forces to censor their public words, as a zero-tolerance policy was in effect.⁴⁹

In Isfahan, where there was more significant anti-Baha’i sentiment, the governor-general was extremely insecure and severely stressed by the security demands from the capital. He was said to be more anxious about the prospect of anti-Baha’i violence than the Baha’is themselves were, since he believed that the Shah would show no quarter to any officials unable to discipline the clerics in their jurisdiction. He was described as a wreck, unable to sleep for three days, and so desperate to avoid the repercussions for instability that he resorted to bribing the city’s senior clerics out of his own pockets, to further reduce the possibility of instability during Moharram. Unlike General Bakhtiar, who had received government allocations to use in disciplining the ulama—since he was the military-governor of the capital—the provincial governors were given directives without funding. Thus, in Isfahan the governor-general had to use thirty-three thousand *rials* of his own funds to ensure order, and feared the final bill would far exceed that amount.⁵⁰ The army commander in Isfahan, General Zarvan, was more confident in the ability of the security forces, and did not believe that they would meet any resistance,

⁴⁸ As mentioned previously, Ashura is the tenth day of the month of Moharram. On this day the martyrdom of Imam Husayn at the Battle of Karbala is commemorated in various ways, including processions through the streets.

⁴⁹ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 376.

⁵⁰ NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 16 / 04 / Box 141 / Folder 570.3 – Religion, Isfahan Consulate, Memorandum of Conversation, May 18, 1955.

since he had met with the clerical leadership and made it clear “that he would have no nonsense from them.”⁵¹

Preparations in Mashhad

In Mashhad, a number of local factors complicated security arrangements, created confusion, and opened up an opportunity for resistance, through public, communal self-flagellation in the Ashura processions. Communal self-mutilation during these processions was a tradition that developed as a way to identify with and communally participate in the suffering and death of the Imam, but this practice was banned under Reza Shah due to its “barbaric” nature. The practice returned after Reza Shah was forced to abdicate in 1941, but was rather limited in scope and severity. In 1955, self-flagellation was banned as part of the effort to prevent any arousal of passions which might develop into violent, anti-Baha’i mobs.

Mashhad was the only city in which there was marked opposition to this restriction. This city had earlier been the site of the infamous 1935 clerical standoff against Reza Shah, in which opponents compared him to Yazid (the oppressive ruler responsible for the death of Imam Husayn) and were eventually slaughtered when the Shah sent in security forces. Given this history, it is not surprising that Mashhadi clerics were especially sensitive to security forces lining the streets as part of an attempt to discipline clerical action. It is also unsurprising that although General Vaseqi was “taking exceptional precautionary measures” for Ashura, he still had “concern over the possibility of violence.”⁵² As such, he intended to permit only one procession over the

⁵¹ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 26 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Stephens, June 6, 1955.

⁵² USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 1: 230.

entire Ashura period and to line this route with troops, prevent any deviations, and immediately dismiss the crowd once the destination was reached.

Despite General Vaseqi's tough talk, his junior officers, Colonel Soltani and Major Arsham, made a point of complaining to the American Consulate that Vaseqi was a moderate who had recently replaced the avowedly anti-cleric Shahrokhshahi, and that the new governor-general was, likewise, a moderate who replaced a more consistently anti-clerical individual. They believed that this was all orchestrated by the British, who controlled the Shah through their lackeys (Alam, Ala, Batmanghelich) and who were working in partnership with the clergy. In their view, the British had been acting through the mullahs for a hundred years and had no desire to cease doing so. As part of this conspiracy, the British *wanted* there to be Moharram violence in Mashhad, and wanted the regional government to fail in preventing it, and this was the reason for the counter-intuitive weakening of the military and civilian leadership of Iran's most conservative major city just prior to an anticipated campaign of religious violence.⁵³

The Consulate rejected such conspiracies, wondering if "perhaps the residents of Eastern Iran are so accustomed to having the English regulate their affairs that they cannot adjust emotionally to the fact that the U.K. no longer has the interest in this area that it had when it governed India."⁵⁴ Although their conspiracy theories were fanciful, Soltani and Arsham were later proven right about the problems that were likely to arise as a result of the freshness and mixed loyalties of Mashhad's new military and civilian leadership, who were likely brought in, in reality, as a gesture to the ulama, to enhance

⁵³ Ibid., 230-31.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 233.

the likelihood of cooperation and to try to avoid the use of force in the conservative stronghold.

The government's Mashhad policy also involved an inconsistent alternation between the carrot and the stick. Dr. Manouchehr Eqbal (future Prime Minister and then chancellor of Tehran University) for example, came "on a secret mission to constrain the clergy in Meshed." He was flown into Mashhad by private plane on July 29 and left the next day amidst much whisperings. According to Soltani, he met with Ayatollah Kafai and other senior clerics and told them that any further anti-Baha'i outbreaks would damage Iran's prestige abroad and would also be "firmly suppressed by the security forces." In addition to threats, he offered the "carrot" of fifty thousand *tomans*. When Eqbal's brother, Abdol-Vahab Eqbal was questioned to confirm this, he did not answer directly, but rather said that he was absolutely confident there would be no anti-Baha'i violence in Mashhad during Moharram since "necessary measures had already been taken." When he was asked if his brother had seen to this, he just smiled and said "perhaps."⁵⁵ This arrangement was confirmed two weeks later when General Vaseqi—tasked with playing the "bad cop" to complement Eqbal's earlier performance—met with Ayatollah Kafai to threaten him personally with dire consequences for any anti-Baha'i agitation in Mashhad during Moharram.

In the final days before Moharram in Mashhad, Ayatollah Kafai and the mainstream clerical leadership remained quiet, but lower-level agitation continued. On the morning of August 15, for example, anti-Baha'i leaflets were anonymously plastered around several parts of the city. In the same period, a rogue preacher in the Gohar Shah Mosque preached against the Baha'is. Major Arsham, the deputy head of G-2 who was

⁵⁵ Ibid., 231.

married to a Baha'i and very much opposed to the clergy, said that his division's strategy for such disregard for the anti-Baha'i mandate was to hold Ayatollah Kafai personally responsible, since he was Mashhad's senior ayatollah. As such, Kafai was personally taken to task for each infraction. In the case of the rogue preacher, Major Arsham "ordered him [Kafai] to discipline the offending mullah."⁵⁶ Through this practice of dealing only with Kafai, and forcing the clerical hierarchy to discipline the lower levels, "the Army hopes that the ayatollah will be forced to restrain the other members of the clergy and refrain from anti-Bahai activity himself."⁵⁷

The Moharram strategy also involved making use of Grand Ayatollah Shahrestani, who was considered at the time to be one of the most powerful ayatollahs after Borujerdi himself. Shahrestani lived in Iraq and was a strong supporter of the monarchy. When the Shah fled Iran in 1953, and his plane stopped in Iraq, no important Iranians in Iraq came to greet him, not even the staff of the Iranian embassy, but Shahrestani came. Ever since then, the Shah provided the Grand Ayatollah with a private plane for his yearly visits to Mashhad and always arranged for him to be met by high government officials during these visits. In 1955, it was arranged for Shahrestani to visit Mashhad for Moharram and to issue a command for calm. This plan collapsed, however, when Shahrestani unexpectedly voted with his feet by returning to Iraq on August 16, several days before the start of the holy month. According to the Governor, Shahrestani heard of the planned clerical coup (discussed below) and, not wishing to be held responsible or to give his implicit consent to this treason, he simply left to disassociate

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 232.

himself from it, as he deplored violence and did not want to be placed in the awkward position of choosing between sanctioning violence or appearing to side with apostates.⁵⁸

Faced with setbacks such as the loss of the Grand Ayatollah's calming influence, Major Arsham made it his personal mission to keep the clergy in line, but constantly reported only limited support from Vaseqi and repeatedly complained to the American Consulate about the loss of General Shahrokhshahi. The previous general had been in charge during the Ramadan pogrom and was not hesitant to resort to violence, as he "would tolerate no anti-Baha'i disturbances in Meshed and was prepared to meet violence with force." With General Vaseqi in charge now, Major Arsham feared that the clerics planned to test his resolve, since he was considered to be weaker than his predecessor. Moved by this sentiment, the Consulate sought out and consulted General Shahrokhshahi about Mashhad and the policies of his successor. Shahrokhshahi wisely pointed out that General Vaseqi's extreme focus on Ayatollah Kafai was misguided, since Kafai was guided by self-interest and if he was pushed too hard to discipline the ranks then the stigma of being seen as pro-Baha'i would outweigh whatever punishments the government could inflict on him, since his rank and position were based on prestige and the assent of those above and below in the hierarchy, and he could only do the army's dirty work for so long before he would lose the basis of his authority.⁵⁹

As Moharram drew closer, the focus did indeed shift from the ayatollahs to the body of believers. As part of this concern, the chiefs of the army, police, and gendarmerie called for a ban on self-flagellation, since they believed that such ecstatic displays had a track record of developing into externally-directed violence. The

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 233-34.

premature departure of Shahrestani, however, caused problems when it came to enforcing the ban. Before he left, the Grand Ayatollah had written a statement denouncing self-flagellation as “barbarous” and against the interests of Islam.⁶⁰ When the government announced its plans for banning self-flagellation, hundreds of copies of this letter were distributed to add legitimacy to the new policy. This plan backfired, however, since it was widely assumed that the Grand Ayatollah’s sudden departure was due to his displeasure over the security forces’ use of his statement, which led to suspicion that it was forged or coerced. As a result, the Grand Ayatollah’s letter condemning self-flagellation, ironically, caused support *for* self-flagellation because of the belief that his leaving Iran was to disavow the letter.⁶¹

Public support for self-flagellation also mounted in response to rumors of American attempts to manipulate the issue. A number of rumors were in circulation concerning anticipated American espionage activity during Moharram. These were said to include American plans to wear disguises to infiltrate religious demonstrations in order to take pictures of self-flagellation to use against the ulama in the foreign press. This story was so widespread that General Vaseqi, Governor Masudi, and Alam were all questioned about it and compelled to ask the Mashhad Consulate about its veracity.⁶²

During the provincial Security Council’s debates over self-flagellation, General Vaseqi pushed for prohibiting cutting of any kind rather than just self-flagellation, while Ram, the moderate new governor-general, argued that only self-flagellation should be prohibited. The Council sided with the general and agreed to ban all forms of cutting and to distribute the Grand Ayatollah’s statement when they announced their policy. On

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid., 295.

⁶² Ibid., 228.

August 23, a few days into Moharram and several days before Ashura, handbills announcing this new policy were placed all over the city and the Grand Ayatollah's statement of support was broadcast on the radio "at intervals throughout the day."

The following evening, four to five hundred clerics converged on the home of Ayatollah Kafai demanding action. "After much emotional pleading, Kafai telephoned the Governor General at 11 pm and arranged for a meeting the next day." The following morning, over two hundred clerics descended on the sympathetic new governor-general. Only twenty clerics were allowed in, while the remainder was forced to wait outside and pray for the success of those who had been allowed inside. Ram had strong ties to the clergy and was known to have a "yielding" approach, as evidenced by his advocacy of ulama-friendly compromises in the Security Council. According to a participant in the clerical delegation, who belonged to the Devotees of the Shah and was also an informant for the American consulate in Mashhad, the clerical representatives "grew more and more emotional, the leaders got down on their knees and, weeping, begged to be allowed to honor their martyred hero Hossein." The tension became so charged that Ram "burst into tears" and said that he would see to it that they would be allowed to self-flagellate, as long as they limited it to the courtyard of the Shrine, between two and four in the morning, on August 29. The clerical representatives swore in the name of Allah to abide by these restrictions and then returned as heroes to the crowd anxiously waiting outside.⁶³

The Islamic Revolution of 1955 that wasn't

Although Borujerdi continued to honor his agreement with the Shah, "top Mullahs were sulking over what they consider government reluctance to institute a wholesale purge of

⁶³ Ibid., 228, 296.

Bahais from government service.”⁶⁴ To partially appease this anger, and serve as a distraction, Ayatollah Shirazi and the instigators of the Hormuzak slaughter were freed, while Governor Hemat and General Azidi (of the Shiraz massacre) were removed. These moves did not quell dissent in the clerical ranks, some of which Borujerdi could not contain. There was, for example, the distribution of circulars in Mashhad that, turning from the Baha’is to the Shah, urged a temporary clerical takeover of the government on Ashura and Tashura (August 28 and 29), beginning with the occupation of government buildings. Nothing came of this plan, but it indicates the strength of anti-government sentiment as a result of their perceived protection of the Baha’is and turn against the ulama.⁶⁵

In connection with this plot, one of Mashhad’s chief clerics, Afsah al-Mutakallimin (who was mentioned previously for his leading role in local anti-Baha’i attacks during the Ramadan pogrom, for which he was arrested) met secretly with a representative from the American Consulate (to avoid being seen going to the Consulate or meeting with Americans).⁶⁶ In this August 12 meeting, the pro-Mosaddeq, anti-Baha’i, and anti-Shah cleric informed the Consulate that, because of his reputation as a leading anti-regime cleric, he was secretly approached by two unnamed individuals from Isfahan who purported to be brothers.⁶⁷ They asked him to be the local coordinator of a political takeover of Iran during Moharram. In the plan, on the 8th, 9th, and 10th day of

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 228-34.

⁶⁶ Afsah al-Mutakallimin claimed that he chose to come to the American Consulate with this information because of his hatred for the British, as a result of which he did not trust the Iranian security forces, as its officers were still largely pro-British, as were the senior clerics that he might otherwise have approached. He claimed that the British were using the distribution of Shrine funds as a front through which to funnel money to certain clerics in exchange for their support of British interests, especially Ayatollahs Kafai, Qomi, and Sabzevari, who “were all known to receive stipends from the U.K. Government” (Ibid., 230).

⁶⁷ The use of the term “brothers” to describe their relationship suggests that they may have been members of Ayatollah Shirazi’s Brotherhood Party.

Moharram (Aug 27-29th) leading ayatollahs would urge their followers to take over the telegraph office (traditionally associated with the British), the Shrine of Imam Ali Reza, and the city's governmental buildings. Similar takeovers would occur in major cities throughout Iran. After this was accomplished, they were to demand the following from the Shah:

- (1) Point IV⁶⁸ must be closed down because “it is a center of adultery between Americans and Iranian women, and U.S. citizens who travel about the country are distributing propaganda to turn the peasants against Islam.”
- (2) “As ordered by His Eminence, Ayatollah Borujerdi, all Baha’is employed by the Iranian government must be fired in forty-eight hours, or the demonstrators will refuse to vacate the telegraph offices, mosques, and public buildings all across Iran.”⁶⁹

In other words, anti-Americanism was conflated with anti-Baha’ism and the result was used as the pretext for revolutionary religious insurrection. It should be noted that although the earlier Ramadan pogrom included condemnations of the Baha’is as agents of America, it did not involve any direct action against American institutions or interests (apart from the aforementioned attack on a Point IV vehicle). The American intervention to end the Ramadan pogrom further added to the rhetoric eliding American and Baha’i interests, however, and American interests and institutions were therefore targeted in this new push.

⁶⁸ Point IV (*Asl-e Chahar*) was the popular Iranian designation for the attempts at a Marshall Plans for Iran. Officially, the development attempt operated as TCI (Technical Cooperation for Iran) until 1953 when it became known as USOM/I (United States Operations Mission in Iran).

⁶⁹ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 1: 229.

To make his risk worthwhile, the “brothers” offered to pay Afsah al-Mutakallimin for his participation in this revolutionary take-over. When he was hesitant, they agreed to substantiate their authority and returned later with a letter from Qom in the name of Ayatollah Borujerdi (although not signed by him) that “calls for a national anti-Baha’i campaign during the coming mourning days... and charged the Baha’is with planning an armed uprising in 1335 (1956) to seize power in Iran.” It reminded readers that Borujerdi had “ordered the faithful to rise up against the false sect.” Instead, it claims that the government blocked the action of the people, promising to instead stop the Baha’is itself, but then betrayed the cause. It warns that the government has demonstrated its true colors and intent to ignore Borujerdi and to keep Baha’is employed. As a result of the “malice and deceit shown by the Imperial Court,” Ayatollah Borujerdi is now disconsolately preparing to leave Iran, since he is prevented from carrying out his religious duties. The letter goes on to claim that the situation is dire and the whole future of Islam in Iran is in danger. For these reasons, the Theological Seminary in Qom is calling on all religious leaders to urge their followers to occupy the aforementioned buildings at the height of Moharram and insist that the Shah terminate all Baha’i employees within forty-eight hours or else abdicate the throne so that “a government can be formed that will carry out the wishes of the Muslims in Iran.”⁷⁰ It is not clear what the alternative government would look like after this cleric-driven revolution, although a new government “carrying out the wishes of the Muslims” implies not only the expulsion of Baha’is but also the implementation of Islamic law to some extent, and a radical shift in foreign policy.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

This planned Islamic coup appears to be the first significant discussion of regime change by the ulama during the Pahlavi period. Although this plan was likely generated by lower-level clergy using Borujerdi's name without his consent, this was not unprecedented. The successful Tobacco Protest in the previous century began in a similar way, when Grand Ayatollah Mirza Shirazi's name was used—initially without his approval—to win support for a movement that also sought to shut down the state to force the Shah to comply with “clerical” demands. The Tobacco Protest, however, never involved the call for violent regime change in favor of an Islamic state if its demands were not met. Even the early Khomeini-led protests of the 1960s never made such strong threats.

On August 13, the American Consulate in Mashhad shared their information on the planned coup with General Vaseqi, only to discover that Iranian security forces had already uncovered the plot, although they were unable to trace its origins and leadership, since they were assuming that Borujerdi's name was being used without his consent. In his assessment, Vaseqi believed that the abortive plans for a coup were further proof that “there was undoubtedly a great deal of undercover preparation for an anti-Baha'i campaign during the coming mourning days.”⁷¹

As mentioned above, Grand Ayatollah Shahrestani left Iran rather than be associated in any way with the coup. It is not clear if the plot collapsed due to Shahrestani's repudiation, or if it was abandoned after being prematurely uncovered by security forces. It is possible that the plot and the “Borujerdi letter” could have been forged by any number of non-clerical groups, although it seems unlikely that Shahrestani

⁷¹ Ibid., 230. As usual, Vaseqi maintained the official governmental position that the British were ultimately behind everything

would react as he did if he did not first receive some form of confirmation about the veracity of the plans. When questioned, Ayatollah Kafai also seemed to confirm the clerical origins of the planned coup, although he did not believe that Borujerdi himself was involved.⁷²

A quiet Moharram, save Mashhad

When Ashura passed without any anti-Baha'i incidents, Denis Wright (of the British embassy) met with Alam as well as General Bakhtiar to discuss the successful suppression of clerical agitation. According to Wright, after he had congratulated them for the "firm measures" employed by the government against the ulama, "they both purred with delight."⁷³

The maintenance of order continued throughout Moharram, which concluded on September 18 with no clerical agitation having occurred.⁷⁴ Prime Minister Ala "mentioned with pride" that the ulama had been suppressed and requested that the State Department be informed that the Iranian government "had been and was still determined to take every precaution, not only in cities but also in villages, which were covered by roving security patrols." He stressed the new focus on an enhanced security regime and noted that, although the Shah reported much lower figures to Washington, in reality, Iran was now spending 60% of its budget on security.⁷⁵

Although anti-Baha'i violence was successfully prevented in Moharram, and the requested crackdown on the clergy was enforced in the provinces as well as the capital,

⁷² Ibid., 231.

⁷³ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 45 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Wright, September 1, 1955.

⁷⁴ An Armenian was said to have been killed on the mistaken notion that he was a Baha'i.

⁷⁵ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 1: 274.

the British and American assessors eventually determined that the Iranian response was inadequate because of a failure of clerical discipline in Mashhad, despite there being no anti-Baha'i violence there. When Wright met with the Shah on September 17, he chided him for his failure to fully discipline Mashhad. The clerics in that city were described as uppity for trying to prevent foreigners from entering its main Shrine, as they had previously been allowed to do before the anti-clerical initiative began. In response to this information, the Shah acted surprised "and suggested that the mullahs were not as strong as all that."⁷⁶ In response, Wright countered that the government's ban on self-flagellation had been ignored in Mashhad to the point that seven hundred were hospitalized for self-inflicted injuries. The Shah claimed to be aware of this and blamed the failure of discipline on the provincial leadership.

Somewhat confused at how far afield from the Bahai issue he was supposed to manage the clergy, the Shah pointed out that from the war years onward it had been Britain's policy—inspired by Oriental Secretary Alan Trott—to "encourage the mullahs, at least so far as the Russians were in the country," but he wondered if it could be that now "perhaps this policy was no longer good."⁷⁷ Wright confirmed this and said that the British now considered the ulama a "bad influence" and told the Shah that in the case of the ulama the "principle excuse for encouraging them" was the assumption that well-supported religious institutions would act as "a safe bulwark against Communism." They now saw this as a "mistake." To support his case, Wright pointed to Italy and said that Communism flourished there despite, or perhaps because of, the strength of the Catholic

⁷⁶ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 53 / 55, Wright to FO, September 21, 1955.

⁷⁷ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 52 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Wright, September 18, 1955.

Church.⁷⁸ The Shah agreed that the ulama “must be kept in their place,” but he thought that, “if trouble were to be avoided,” the taming of Mashhad should be done slowly and that it “would take about 2 years to get the mullahs in their place,” since “if he went too fast he might stir up great opposition.”⁷⁹ To support his theory, the Shah referred to Argentina, implying that problems arose there because Peron had taken too tough a line on the church. Wright countered that the Argentine problem was not because of disciplining the church, but rather because Peron had suppressed all freedoms, and “the pot had eventually boiled over.”⁸⁰

As this conversation makes clear, what had begun in the summer as a concern for preventing anti-Baha’i violence had developed, by autumn, into a larger concern over disciplining the public expression of Shi’ite identity, which extended to the very bodies of the partisans themselves. As such, although there was no anti-Baha’i violence in Mashhad, it was still regarded as a security failure due to self-flagellation, although Governor-General Ram had himself permitted this.

Despite the ayatollahs’ sworn promises to Ram that cutting would be limited to the Shrine, between two and four in the morning—so as to remain unnoticed and prevent repercussions for Ram—the thousands that began to cut themselves at the Shrine became so “aroused” that they left the Shrine, surged into the streets, and paraded until five in the morning. Since this public spectacle was not punished, it was repeated around noon. When questioned later, Governor-General Ram told the director of USOM that he had “deplored” the spectacle but he “had been forced to comply” since he had been informed by the clerics that “popular pressure” against the ban on self-flagellation was so intense

⁷⁸ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 53 / 55, Wright to FO, September 21, 1955.

⁷⁹ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 52 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Wright, September 18, 1955.

⁸⁰ Ibid., FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 53 / 55, Wright to FO, September 21, 1955.

that they would have been forced to yield to it, even if no permission was given, and that this would have had to be put down violently.⁸¹

Ram saw himself as a mediator between strong-willed clerics and a stubborn army and believed that he was disliked because mediators are always unpopular, but that by giving permission he had prevented unnecessary bloodshed. Governor Masudi also defended Ram, claiming that a sudden break with tradition would be unwise, but that after allowing the compromise of pre-dawn self-laceration in the courtyard of the Shrine, the limits of the compromise should have been enforced and no further compromises made. “Tension among the mullahs had mounted at such an alarming rate after flagellation was banned,” he maintained, “that there might well have been violent disturbances if the Governor General had not temporized.”⁸² Ram was heavily criticized, however, by majles deputy Reza Kadivar as well as by Colonel Soltani and Major Arsham, who saw him as “thoroughly pliant.”⁸³

Although Ram won the support of the clergy, the military was “almost contemptuous” over the “spineless” actions of the governor-general.⁸⁴ This view was shared by the pro-regime publication *Aftab-e Sharq*, which, on August 31 and September 1, editorialized against him, saying that he had ignored true Islam and that, instead, through him “fanaticism” had been “stirred up” by his vacillation and disrespect of the law. In so doing, he had chosen “fanaticism” over the side of the army and the “enlightened” people of Iran.⁸⁵

⁸¹ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 1: 296.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 297, 298.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Aftab-e Sharq*, August 31 and September 1, 1955.

Self-flagellation represented a clerical “victory” in a tangential issue, but this one area of defiance was in contrast to forced compliance in a multitude of others. As part of the security measures in Mashhad, any mosque or private location taking part in Ashura had to first register and have their plans and clerics approved. Moreover, both the administrators and the clerics were compelled to sign a document beforehand in which they swore to mention “no foreign country or minority group in Iran” [i.e. America or the Baha’is] and, despite “considerable grumbling,” everyone complied. Restrained in every other way and unable to direct their anger externally, thousands directed this frustration at their own bodies, mutilating them in their ecstatic identification with the suffering of Imam Husayn at the hands of the oppressor Yazid. This suffering was embodied and displayed to an unprecedented degree and, although self-flagellation had been reemerging since 1941, the scale and severity seen in Mashhad in 1955 was on a different level from that observed previously and was considered the most extreme in more than a generation, “with several thousand persons parading their wounds through the streets” and over six hundred needing hospitalization for serious or critical wounds.⁸⁶

In the view of the Mashhad Consulate, after being suppressed for so long, the return of self-flagellation “has become something of a symbol of the re-ascendance of the clergy after the harsh control by Reza Shah.” For, “after years of humiliating suppression under the late shah,” it was felt that “the mullahs have apparently no intention of abandoning this privilege without a struggle.” Moreover, it was the Consul’s conclusion that this issue, although symbolically significant for these reasons, only rose to become the issue of the season due to the way in which it was openly fetishized, abhorred, and circumscribed by the state, causing it to receive more interest and participation than

⁸⁶ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 1: 294.

would have occurred if there had been no attempts at proscribing it. Instead, “against their will,” the Security Council “managed to abet what was probably the greatest display of fanatical slashing since the early reign of Reza Shah.”⁸⁷

“I hate Mullahs”: Ramadan, 1956

The Shah’s cognitive dissonance regarding the coercive nature of his rule was considered to be an especially problematic element of the emerging royal dictatorship. Despite his regime’s use of closed-door violence, from almost the beginning of direct rule, the Shah continued to maintain the public facade that he was a modern, Western leader who was the antithesis of his “illiterate thug” father. This veiling of the iron fist beneath the gentleman’s glove was attacked in the majles by Deputy Haerizadeh in a tirade which was described as the first open “sedition” against the Shah in the majles since the Mosaddeq period. In this October 16 rant—which began with the caveat that he hated the Baha’is and had no sympathy for them—Haerizadeh described the violence associated with the government-sponsored pogrom as “deplorable” and claimed that the Shah had “stifled every bit of liberty in Iran.” He went on to urge the government to take responsibility for what it was. If it wished to be a dictatorship, he advised, it should be an open one and accept responsibility for its actions. Instead, by ruling like a dictatorship while professing to be a democracy, the government was acting “like an ostrich” (camel-bird in Persian). “When we ask it to fly, it says it is a camel. When we ask it to carry a load, it says it is a bird.”⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

This rare internal criticism had little or no impact on the Shah, beyond prompting him to blacklist Haerizadeh, preventing his re-election, along with the re-elections of others who had expressed criticism during 1955, such as Deputy Reza Afshar. Indeed, despite the “jittery” first year of the Shah’s dictatorship, the following year was characterized by a “continued growth” in the Shah’s boldness and “direct influence,” despite “the growing unpopularity of the security regime.”⁸⁹

As the anniversary of the anti-Baha’i pogrom approached, the regime faced Anglo-American pressure to prevent a repeat of the previous year’s violence, but it was confident that this would be achieved, given the security forces’ complete success at Moharram (with the partial exception of Mashhad, which was, in any case, attributed to Ram’s mismanagement rather than clerical strength). The panic and uncertainty of the days before Moharram were now replaced by an almost carefree certainty in the new security regime.

Unlike the previous year, there were only sporadic anti-Baha’i incidents, all of which were locally initiated. The most significant of these occurred in February, well before Ramadan, and involved the harsh harassment of eighty to one hundred Baha’is in the village of Hessar (48 km west of Torbat-i-Heidari, in Khorasan). In this village, in addition to other forms of persecution, Baha’is were forced to crawl on the ground and were fitted with donkey saddles and made to carry their assailants up and down the street for the amusement of the crowd observing the spectacle. As a result of this humiliation, “the entire Bahai population of the village pulled up stakes and left, possibly for

⁸⁹ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 127071 / EP 1011 / 1, Stevens, “Annual Political Review for 1956” January 18, 1957.

Tehran.”⁹⁰ No one died in this action, but no one was punished either. It was hoped that, given the obscure rural location, this incident would not be noticed by Iran’s foreign patrons, who were still pressing the protection of the Baha’is. Despite being aware of the Hessar incident, Governor-General Ram told the area’s American Consul that there had been no new incidents. Ram’s fear of admitting a new incident was not considered surprising in the Consulate’s view, as “It is evident that most Iranian officials are sensitive about American criticism of the anti-Bahai incidents last year” and, as a result of this ongoing pressure, men like Ram “seem to have an exaggerated idea of the size and influence of this sect in the United States.”⁹¹

There were similar attempts at humiliation in Birjand as well as a “mild economic boycott” in some locations. In the major urban areas, however, the security forces insured that the streets were calm and it was felt that they would remain calm “in direct proportion to the desire of the central government to keep it quiet.”⁹² In Southern Tehran during Ramadan, for example, an associate of Falsafi incited an anti-Baha’i mob, but this was immediately suppressed and all the clerics involved imprisoned for the rest of the holy month. Because of the Shah’s new “tough attitude,” attacks and public condemnation like this were infrequent, although “there remains among the populace an overtone of hatred against this harmless and progressive minority group.”⁹³

As part of the enhanced security regime, Falsafi had “been muzzled,” since he remained brazenly unrepentant and “continues to breathe fire against the Baha’is.” To contain this threat, he was prevented from speaking publically during Ramadan in 1956,

⁹⁰ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 2: 79.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 176.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 80.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, Reel 24: 410.

even in his own mosque, and was replaced on state radio by a liberal, pro-government cleric who assiduously avoided any topics that were remotely controversial. Like Falsafi, “mullas, high and low, still rankle under the ignominious collapse of last year’s anti-Baha’i campaign.” It was only in the less-closely-observed mosques, however, that some were brave enough to engage in cautious attacks on the Baha’is.⁹⁴

The excessive confidence about Ramadan security in 1956, exhibited both by the Shah and his inner circle, was perhaps best exemplified by the Cabinet’s Ramadan tour of rural areas by train, on the anniversary of the previous year’s attacks. Ramadan is, of course, the month of fasting during which Muslims do not eat, drink, or smoke during daylight hours. During this Ramadan trip, however, the Cabinet (all of whom were professed Muslims) seemed to make a point of cavalierly defying the sanctity of the month. As soon as the train left the station, the ministers demanded something to drink. After being offered tea or Pepsi, they grew upset and did not become happy until the waiter returned with Johnny Walker Red Label, since “almost all” of the cabinet insisted on whiskey.⁹⁵ The only objections that were raised occurred because some ministers began to smoke before the train had left the platform and other ministers felt that this was too bold and should be avoided. These objections were dismissed, however and the cigarettes were cupped with hands. Once the train was out of sight of the platform, the others began lighting up cigarettes.

As the day progressed, the cabinet ministers stopped to visit various rural locations, greet crowds, display the requisite religiosity, and shout slogans before boarding the train to smoke and drink and enjoy a sumptuous lunch of chelo kabob, eggs,

⁹⁴ Ibid..

⁹⁵ Ibid., Reel 7: 253-61.

soup, Pepsi, doogh, whiskey, and two types of ice cream. Alam was less “one of the boys” than the rest, more interested in politics and talking with an American officer along for the ride than he was in revelry. When he was asked if the clerics were giving any trouble this year for Ramadan, he said that the only trouble with the ulama occurred in Shiraz when one cleric organized protests against increased electricity rates “and I had to lock him up.” Alam, apparently somewhat under the influence, confessed, “I hate mullahs!”⁹⁶

Although the disregard for Ramadan sensibilities was pursued with at least nominal discretion, other scandals were less concealed and became the topic of public concern in 1956. Even Ebtehaj, the head of the Plan Organization known for his “widely trumpeted moral rectitude,” was exposed as a “gallivanting” “woman chaser.” He was said to have been having an affair with the wife of one of his subordinates before he was “amateurishly surprised by a cuckolded husband,” caught in a fight, and both marriages endangered.⁹⁷ Alam also aroused the Shah’s displeasure for mistreating the peasants in his villages, cheating with a woman from an aristocratic family, and involving himself in a series of other problems.⁹⁸ As for the Shah himself, rumors swirled of the Shah’s rampant flirtations, an old story about an illegitimate son resurfaced, and there was also “a vague tale of a man who possesses obscene photos of the Shah taken in Europe who is trying to get the pictures through to Ayatollah Borujerdi, but is being pursued by the security forces.” The Shah was also blamed for the actions of his inner circle, since “the

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., Reel 1: 596-97.

⁹⁸ His other troubles included a feud with Dr. Eqbal that was exacerbated when Alam gave Eqbal the unenviable task of supervising who was to be “elected” to the majles, a much-hated position, since it won one about a hundred grateful friends but thousands of enemies.

bears imitate the bear trainer.”⁹⁹ These scandals are not important in and of themselves, but are mentioned as an indication of the confidence of the regime, as measured by the Cabinet’s lack of discretion. Whereas, in early 1955, the vices of the Court could be used as clerical leverage, and the Queen was shipped to Europe to avoid further provoking Borujerdi, in 1956 there was brazen disregard for religious sensibilities. This is not to say that the Shah and his Cabinet lived model lives before this, but rather that in earlier periods there was more fear of the consequence of scandal, and thus more discretion, at least while within Iran.

The new political reality brought on by the security regime can also be credited with the mainstream ulama’s abandonment of violent political demonstrations in favor of non-violent civil disobedience, especially boycotts. This can be seen in the May protests in Isfahan over electricity rates, which increased from five to eight *rials* per kilowatt-hour. To protest this development, the Isfahani clergy led a successful city-wide electricity boycott for several days. As a result, the leading cleric involved, Seyyed Falli, was exiled to Tehran by Governor-General Farokh, prompting angry crowds to gather outside of Farokh’s house. Faced with this mob, Farokh called General Zarqam, who met the crowd alone, his troops holding back. He was able to calm the crowd and work out an arrangement in which Falli would be allowed to return as long as he ceased this course of action. Zarqam warned them, however, that if he was again forced to intervene he “would go to that individual and cut off his beard.” Electricity rates were reduced to ease tensions, but Falli only stayed quiet for a few days before resuming his criticisms.

⁹⁹ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 1: 596-97.

Furious, Farokh and Zarqam had Falli and his brother taken away to Tehran on a special army plane.¹⁰⁰

The most interesting aspect of this episode is that, according to prominent Isfahan merchant Mohamed Ordubadi, some of the protesters and at least two of the leading clerics were consciously employing Gandhi's passive resistance techniques. He noted that these techniques only worked when they were directed by individuals with immense symbolic capital, like leading clerics, who "directed and focused" such movements.¹⁰¹ The use of boycotts and other peaceful and "civilized" forms of protest during the summers of both 1955 and 1956 suggest that Borujerdi—who was well-read and who reached out to the larger Muslim world to an unprecedented degree—could have been consciously employing lessons learned in India and elsewhere. It is, of course, possible that his encouragement of boycotts and civil disobedience was instead based on Iranian precedents, such as the Tobacco Protest of the Qajar period, despite Ordubadi's claims of Indian influence.¹⁰²

“Half a loaf”: the arrest of Kashani and the Hormuzak trial

The trial of those arrested in connection with the massacre of Baha'is in Hormuzak did not begin until a year later, on June 12, 1956. The reason for the delay has to do with the vacillating nature of the Shah. At first, he supported Alam's desire to prosecute those involved, but when the ulama fell in line and there were no further major incidents of violence against the Baha'is, the Shah told Alam to "let the whole question drop out of

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., Reel 2: 74.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 75.

¹⁰² For the Tobacco Protest, see Keddie, *Modern Iran*, Chapter Four.

sight.”¹⁰³ This was not unexpected, as the only politicians really pushing for an investigation, apart from Alam, were Deputies Haerizadeh and Reza Afshar. The latter was the same deputy who had earlier nearly caused the dissolution of the majles due to his criticism of the government’s participation in the pogrom (he was not permitted to be re-elected as a result of this criticism).¹⁰⁴ Later in 1955, however, the Shah reversed himself yet again, after the attempt by the Fedaiyan-e Islam to assassinate Prime Minister Ala in November. This violence renewed the Shah’s faith in Alam’s council and he ordered that the Hormuzak trial proceed and that the government “take a stronger attitude toward religious extremists who meddle in politics.”¹⁰⁵ The trial of the Hormuzak mob was one part of a larger push against the clergy that included the destruction of the Fedaiyan-e Islam and a short-lived attempt to bring Ayatollah Kashani to justice for the 1951 murder of General Razmara.

Although Borujerdi detested Kashani, he intervened on his behalf after his arrest because he was a fellow ayatollah, and he did not want the precedent to be established that ayatollahs could be executed for their *fatwas*. Modarespur (a religious leader at the leading theological school in Isfahan) explained that, despite Kashani being regarded as a black sheep, the potential execution of a prominent ayatollah was regarded by the clerical hierarchy as “a direct threat to their interests and their power in the country.” The son and representative of Ayatollah Kafai, the most prominent cleric in Mashhad, likewise claimed that they were “distressed to see an ayatollah arrested and brought up for

¹⁰³ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 2: 67.

¹⁰⁴ In the 1956 majles elections, Afshar - “whose name seems to be anathema to the court”—was prevented from running for office. He was met by police and told that there was no need for him to bother campaigning. The governor-general told his supporters to stop any activity on his behalf, and also told him this personally. In addition, army forces instructed the villages in his area not to vote for him (*Ibid.*, Reel 1: 868).

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, Reel 2: 67.

questioning before uneducated ruffians” and that “the arrest of any ayatollah was bound to hurt the prestige of the entire clergy.” Still, he said that Kashani’s support “had always been stronger in the bazaar” than with the ulama, and that it would be fine with them if Kashani was exiled or imprisoned, if it was done with discretion and he was not killed. Grand Ayatollah Shahrestani, from Iraq, was more concerned and actively intervened for Kashani, saying that the arrest of a prominent ayatollah “disturbed all of us.” Petitions also arrived from Sunni religious leaders in Baghdad, which claimed that the arrest of Kashani “incurs the resentment of the Muslim world.” Despite clerical pressure to free Kashani, there was “almost no public sympathy on his behalf,” due to his smeared reputation. Facing pressure from below, Borujerdi personally intervened for his release but, as the price for this intervention, he “has notified Kashani that, no matter what the outcome of his case, he is never again at any time to become involved in political activity of any sort.”¹⁰⁶

When it came to the Fedaiyan, however, there was no attempt to save Safavi or the organization. Hojjat al-Islam Sebt-e Ashtiani points out that the Fedaiyan “never had much support” among the clerical hierarchy and that the majority had been silent about their feelings earlier because no one dared criticize the group “out for fear of being assassinated himself,” but now “the organization lost virtually all support among the clergy.” Although he also disapproved of Kashani and saw the efforts of the Fedaiyan and Kashani as similarly repulsive, Ashtiani did not think that Kashani should be treated the same as a lay leader like Safavi. Kashani was an ayatollah and this was “the highest rank in the Shia sect, and the position was one that must compel respect or the whole religious structure was weakened.” As such, he was “uneasy about the possibility that

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., Reel 1: 612-15, 637, 658-60, 664-67.

Ayatollah Borujerdi's [own] position might be effected" by the Kashani precedent, and felt that instead of being killed, Kashani should be exiled to Iraq with "as little disrespect as possible."¹⁰⁷

At first, Borujerdi's appeals for Kashani were "swept aside by General Bakhtiar," but Kashani was eventually freed as pressure mounted and the Shah vacillated. The release of Kashani was interpreted by the Americans as a loss of face for the Shah, due to his "starting with great fanfare a project which was quietly given up after a few months." It was further noted with displeasure that "This procedure is becoming familiar."¹⁰⁸

Following the successful defense of Kashani, Borujerdi enthusiastically took up the defense of those involved in the Hormuzak massacre. Even though this massacre took place in violation of his call for calm, Borujerdi felt that Baha'is could be killed with impunity according to Islamic law, and he opposed any state efforts to hold Muslims accountable for this action. In any case, many of those accused were not actually involved in the massacre. Muslim and Baha'i sources both confirm that none of the three local instigators were being tried. Instead, the forty-four selected for trial represented a cross-section of the villages involved.¹⁰⁹ That is to say, it included innocent or marginally involved individuals and the trial was an exercise in collective punishment. This was, in many ways, similar to what happened in the aftermath of the 1924 murder of American Vice Consul Robert Imbrie (following accusations that he was a Baha'i). In the Imbrie episode, many leaders of the mob action were not charged and a cross-section of those on the scene was instead punished to satisfy American pressure for justice.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 779-81.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., Reel 2: 67.

¹¹⁰ See Appendix II.

Included in the forty-four facing trial for the Hormuzak massacre were a seventy-year-old man, a forty-year-old woman, and a youth of eighteen. The accused individuals were from a very rural area and were apparently “bewildered” by both Tehran and the legal proceedings during the trial. The legal complexities of their trial were magnified by the presence of additional lawyers representing the relatives of the victims, lawyers hired by the Baha’i community to support the lackluster prosecution, and twelve lawyers that Borujerdi hired to defend the accused villagers. Borujerdi also provided funds for all additional costs related to the defense, including providing for the transport and other expenses for the families of the accused to attend the trial. He also seems to have provided funds to support the pro-defense enthusiasts among the audience and immediately outside of the courtroom. These crowds were organized by senior ulama and featured impassioned preachers “constantly going through prayers for the salvation of Islam and the confounding of its enemies, with the result that it is often difficult for other spectators to hear what is going on.”¹¹¹ In response to the intimidation of the crowds, the five judges on the Tehran High Criminal Court “look slightly nervous and may be wishing they were somewhere else.”¹¹²

In their coverage of the trial, many Iranian papers cited the “unbearable provocations” that the Baha’is “offered” to the Muslims of the village, leading to the murders.¹¹³ There was little sympathy for the Baha’is among any other group, and the trial of the participants in the mob (and others), rather than the instigators, only further dissipated what little sympathy existed.

¹¹¹ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 2: 68.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

Religious leaders and many of the lower classes who are influenced by the religious leaders are already beginning to look on the case as a plot by the Bahais to murder innocent Muslims, and popular feeling over the trial is building up somewhat in Tehran. The leaders of other classes and most educated people, who were and are horrified by the details of the crimes, tend to express an opinion that the perpetrators should all be hanged, but then, considering the character of the accused, who were evidently driven like sheep to their crime, they state that the accused weren't "really responsible."¹¹⁴

As the trial proceeded, there was little indication of how it would be resolved, given that it had evolved into a proxy war between Borujerdi and Alam, with the Baha'is also employing every resource available to them in order to overturn the idea that they could be killed without legal consequence. It was felt that:

This trial represents another minor crisis point between the Shia clergy and the Shah's Government... [The ulama] will bring all possible pressure to bear on the Shah and Ala both at high Court levels and through public opinion. The Baha'i community is equally determined to see that the murderers are punished, and the Interior Ministry [Alam] reportedly agrees with them at present. Whether he or the Shah will change his mind is another question; certainly neither Alam nor His Majesty is known for perseverance and single-mindedness... A verdict of death or life imprisonment for any significant number of the defendants would be a blow to the political power of the Shia clergy. Religious sanction would no longer be certain to save a man from the consequences of the criminal code, and the practical political power of mullahs would almost certainly decline proportionally... An acquittal or purely nominal penalties would be regarded by the mullahs as a green light for further persecutions and similar activities in the future, and would rouse the deep resentment of the Bahai community, other religious minorities, and the larger part of the educated urban classes, as well as causing a drop in Iranian prestige abroad if picked up by the foreign press.¹¹⁵

Conservative politicians, however, felt confident that the Shah "will give way under religious pressure," and would

typically, attempt to compromise the issue, ordering the judges to free some of the defendants and sentencing some of the others to terms as long as five years.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

While this would satisfy no one, neither would it enrage anyone, but would most probably set the problem to one side for a time.¹¹⁶

It is very telling that—just a year into the Shah’s emerging dictatorship—it was so easy for his political opponents to so exactly predict the messy and ineffectual compromise that the Shah’s indecision would compel him to make. On July 9, 1956, the trial concluded and, of the forty-four accused, only twenty-one were found guilty and these received jail sentences ranging from seven months to four years.¹¹⁷ The judgment was universally viewed “as a compromise typical of the present Government”¹¹⁸ and a “political not legal decision, not satisfying either side.”¹¹⁹

These nominal sentences, although preposterously light for serial murder, shocked the large conservative crowds that had gathered in solidarity with the prisoners. In the context of the proxy struggle with Alam, what was a relative victory for the accused villagers amounted to a humiliating defeat for Borujerdi, since anything less than a full acquittal was seen as a legal victory for the Baha’is and a blow to clerical prestige, given the amount of time and resources that had been invested, the expectation of an acquittal that the ulama had promulgated, and the establishment of the precedent that Baha’is could no longer be killed with impunity.

The Baha’is were equally angered, having expected that the guilty would be appropriately punished, since the government had gone to the trouble of moving ahead with a trial at all. The verdicts failed to provide a definitive resolution to their status in Iran. If anything, it indicated that Baha’is could no longer be killed with impunity (as occurred earlier in the decade, most famously with the murder of Dr. Berjis), but at the

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 69.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 135.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 135-36.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., Reel 4: 832.

same time the penalty for their death was far less than would result from the killing of a non-Baha'i Iranian. As it was, their lives were not worth less than seven months imprisonment, but were not worth more than four years in jail.

The State Department's Division of Research feared that the guilty verdicts might lead the ulama to assassinate the Shah. The American Embassy rejected this analysis, however, and claimed that, although angry, clerics were not yet enraged to this point, but such an eventuality could have occurred if sentences of death had been handed down. It was felt, however, that the remnants of the Feda'iyān-e Islam might attempt to kill the Shah in response to the sentencing of the Hormuzak assailants, but that if this occurred Borujerdi would disassociate himself from them and leave them in the cold. The Feda'iyān was effectively dead, in any case, since the execution of its leadership following the attempt on the life of the Prime Minister, and all that was left were a few former members loitering in the bazaars. In any case,

The Embassy believes that Ayatollah Borujerdi... would be quite frightened and horrified should the Shah be killed or die a natural death, although he is undeniably angry and resentful over the Shah's conduct and policies. Borujerdi and his cohorts are probably well aware that while the Shah's regime may be far from perfect from their point of view, most successor regimes would, in the long run, probably be worse. A military fascist regime, nationalism of the Mosaddeq variety, or even a republic would probably be detrimental, in varying degrees, to the status of the clergy. Borujerdi also knows that, while he cannot control the Shah, he can always exert strong influence on him if he screams loudly enough. Half a loaf is better than none.¹²⁰

Continued firmness

As the summer of 1956 continued, the government's anti-clerical policies were judged to be "firm and wise." Clerics across Iran continued to be arrested and brought to Tehran, "in accordance with current policy," for distributing anti-Baha'i literature and agitating

¹²⁰ Ibid., Reel 6: 193.

against them.¹²¹ Still, the British and Americans felt that a strong government was needed in order to implement a sufficiently firm attitude towards the ulama, but that the Shah was merely stable but not yet “strong.” To prove this assessment wrong, the Shah was constantly insisting that “the Mullahs were now firmly under control.”¹²²

The problem, however, was that the definition of “control” was constantly expanding and shifting. On June 27, for example, Secretary of State Dulles told the embassy that they should insist on the Baha’is being able to celebrate their holy days, since suppression of these rituals “if carried out... would eventually result in the strangulation of the Baha’i religion without actual violence.”¹²³ These instructions came at the same time that other directives from Dulles were calling for the Shah to be pressed to stop Shi’ite rituals during Ashura (which, by Dulles’ logic above, would cause the strangulation of Shi’ism). What had begun as a straightforward attempt to stop communal violence had expanded into a larger project to deny conservative Shi’ites the same religious freedoms that the intervention had supposedly been about to begin with.

In their reply to Dulles, Tehran stressed that the Baha’i issue is “not a simple one” and that the type of large Baha’i gatherings that Dulles wanted his embassy to push for would, in their opinion, “almost certainly fan up hatred of the minority.” The claim that the denial of the right to assemble amounted to a “strangulation” of the Baha’i community was characterized by the embassy as an exaggeration. On the contrary, they maintained that Baha’ism would survive even “under the handicaps which it faces at present” and “absolute religious freedom for the Bahais would result in widely-supported

¹²¹ Ibid., Reel 2: 78.

¹²² TNAPRO, FO 371 / 120722 / EP 1051 / 26, Wright to FO, April 18, 1956.

¹²³ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 416.

mullah countermoves which might seriously endanger internal security.” In any case, the problem was not religious freedom for the existing Baha’i community but, rather,

the real issue, as far as the Shia clergy is concerned, is the threat of numbers of conversions of young Muslims to Bahaism. It has been reliably reported that high government officials and others have urged the Bahais to cease proselytization pointing out that if Islam did not feel threatened by Bahaism, the position of the Baha’is would be analogous to that of the safe and respected Zoroastrians.¹²⁴

Prior to Dulles’s intervention, Baha’is had been restricted to meeting in private homes in groups of five or less. When restrictions eased, larger gatherings and celebrations resumed. Some of these larger gatherings included the welcoming of new members who had converted in the previous year but who had not yet had a chance to be formally welcomed into the community.¹²⁵ This continued proselytization during the worst period of Baha’i persecution in the Pahlavi period and, more significantly, the ability to actually win converts in this environment, seem to legitimize the contemporary view that the Baha’i Faith presented a unique threat to the ulama.

Since the hard-won promise to exclude Baha’is from the civil service and military leadership was “loosely enforced,” Baha’is continued to be perceived as being as much of a religio-economic threat as they had been before the previous year’s pogrom.¹²⁶ As a result of this failure to enforce dismissals, and his turn against the ulama who had previously been his most loyal supporters, Borujerdi and others continuously raised the cry that the “Shah cannot be trusted.”¹²⁷

Hojjat al-Islam Ashtiani informed the American consulate that “what was really resented was the Government’s equivocal attitude towards the established religion.” The

¹²⁴ Ibid., Reel 2: 136.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 135.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Ibid., Reel 4: 846;

government had “promised the clergy to take definite, firm steps to discharge all Bahais from official positions and curb their proselytizing in this country. Then no sooner had these promises been made then every effort was made to avoid them.” Instead, “the officials only made promises which have not been carried out.” Ashtiani was not personally interested in either violence or anti-Baha’ism, but claimed that he was nevertheless “disgusted” by the lack of respect and explained that

What enlightened mullahs want is a Government which treats the Shia religion with honesty and respect. The Shah knows very well what a debt he owes to the clergy for their firm support on the 28th of Mordad [1953 coup]. No other group was as unanimous in backing the monarch,.. and the Shah should recognize and be grateful for their continuing support... [One] cannot buy such loyalty at any price... All that religious circles want is to be treated honestly and with respect... [but] the Government had given definite promises to His Eminence which they have failed to carry out. If they had not intended to do so all along, then they should never have taken such a position. But once the Government gave such promises, it should have made every effort to fulfill them.”¹²⁸

He further adds that while the clergy should avoid politics, it is also the case that “the Government should not meddle with religion” and that “if foreign diplomats [Americans] attempt to persuade them to do otherwise” then this intrigue should be exposed.¹²⁹

It should be noted that, despite its turn against the clergy, the government still retained Baha’i properties seized the previous year. Under American pressure, however, scattered Baha’i properties in the provinces began to be returned, although the fate of the most important seized assets in Tehran remained “cloudy” more than a year later. The most important seized property was the Tehran Haziratu’l-Quds building (the National Baha’i Center), which had been damaged during the Ramadan pogrom. Despite the

¹²⁸ Ibid., Reel 2: 168-69.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

spectacle of the destruction of its dome, which Prime Minister Ala described as an “ever present insult” to Muslims, the building itself was left intact.¹³⁰ It was occupied by the forces of General Teymur Bakhtiar, who was Iran’s security czar as well as the military governor of Tehran and the head of the 2nd Armored Division.

Bakhtiar was known to be pro-American, very much opposed to the British and the Russians, and to be filled with ambition, to the point that he spent much of his time trying to secure American support if he were to carry out a coup against the Shah, whose unpopular regime he denounced as “by and for the upper class.” He argued that if the Communists were to be prevented from taking Iran, he should be the new man in charge, as the Shah did not inspire the people as he would, and Iran could not be free of the Left until “people are given genuine hope that the nation is on the march. They do not have such hope at present.”¹³¹ Bakhtiar’s scheming eventually resulted in the Shah turning against him in 1961, and ordering his assassination in 1970. In the late 1950s, however, Bakhtiar’s importance was second only to Alam, since he was the chief architect of the Shah’s security regime, founding and initially heading the secret police upon which the regime grew dependent. Bakhtiar gained his trusted position through the successful two-year crackdown on Mosaddeq supporters and Tudeh members that followed the 1953 coup. As a result of his efforts in this regard, he became the youngest three-star general in modern Iranian history (at the age of thirty-nine). It was also during this period that Bakhtiar developed a strong working relationship with the Americans, despite their low opinion of him.¹³²

¹³⁰ Ibid., 78.

¹³¹ Ibid., 81.

¹³² The British were also weary of Bakhtiar and expressed disgust at his use of torture, but decided that since they did not say anything to America about lynchings and other human rights violations, they should

With the anti-clerical crackdown, ostensibly to prevent further anti-Baha'i violence, Bakhtiar again worked with the Americans to pursue their policy objectives, despite the fact that this time he was sympathetic with the anti-Baha'i views of his clerical targets, and rather despised the Baha'is that he was protecting. His "very real personal feelings against the Bahais fairly shines through" whenever he addressed the subject.¹³³ Like Prime Minister Ala, he had a profound dislike for them, particularly when they were "out" as Baha'is.¹³⁴ Bakhtiar felt that "Bahais may keep their faith, but certainly should not be allowed to propagate it."¹³⁵ While discussing several high-ranking Baha'i officers (still in place, despite 1955's supposed purge), the American officer noticed the barely-concealed look of disgust on Bakhtiar's face. In the General's view:

The people are upset... We have religious freedom in this country, but the Bahais are not willing to keep quiet and enjoy that freedom; on the contrary, they are always trying to spread their own religion, and as a consequence, they hurt the feelings of Moslems and upset them. We have recently tried to persuade Sabet [a Baha'i who was one of the wealthiest businessmen in Iran] and other prominent Bahais not to proselytize, but up to now they have not indicated that they are willing to abandon their previous attitude... At this point Bakhtiar listed several members of the Bahai Spiritual Council in Tehran—out of five names mentioned, all but one were army officers, colonels and generals.¹³⁶

He went on to speak approvingly of Ala's plans to summon Baha'i leaders and tell them to "change their tactics" and cease proselytizing. Like Ala, Bakhtiar was primarily offended by the Baha'is' positive assertion of their identity in public and by

likewise not apply pressure about human rights issues in Iran (TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1569, Secret minutes (and margin notes), March 11-14, 18-19, and 29, 1956).

¹³³ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 2: 83.

¹³⁴ This anti-Baha'i attitude of Bakhtiar, Ala, and other secular nationalists in Iran is described in American diplomatic reports as being roughly analogous to the negative attitude shown by Sunni nationalists in Pakistan towards the Ahmadis.

¹³⁵ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 2: 83.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 84.

attempts to share their religious beliefs. He, for example, spoke angrily of the initial period after the takeover of the Haziratu'l-Quds, when the Baha'is had left a caretaker behind to be present during the occupation. This continued for some time before Bakhtiar "found out that he was trying to subvert the Muslim faith of some of my enlisted men and even some of my officers in the Military Government, and I had to send him away for his own good."¹³⁷ Still, despite his personal feelings, Bakhtiar was committed to protect the Baha'is as he had been ordered, and assured the Americans that he was "ready to use any means to stop any disorders which may emerge."¹³⁸

After the security forces' success in Ramadan 1956, Ashura commemorations in the conservative south of Tehran were permitted to be larger than ever, as a demonstration to the Americans of Bakhtiar's success in disciplining the clerics and proof of the government's claim that "it could control any situation." Although "bigger and more intense" than previous years, there was no anti-Baha'i agitation and there was "no disorder" or violence of any kind, due to the actions of the security forces. In the American view, it was felt that "the display of grief was more for their own unhappy lives than for their martyr's death" and the swelling spectacle of staged suffering was actually "a way of protesting against the grinding and growing poverty of the Iranian masses."¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Bakhtiar added the following digression: "I found a paper in the temple when I took it over, which, in beautiful calligraphy, "denounced the Prophet as a liar and bastard". I immediately locked the paper up in a safe, because if it were made public, it would greatly inflame the mullahs and the people." It is unclear what he is referring to, but the context and use of fine calligraphy suggest that the text was a passage by the Bab or Baha'u'llah that challenged a sacrosanct Muslim belief, such as Muhammad's station as the last prophet. It could also be that the passage in question alluded to the belief that Baha'u'llah was the "Sender of the Messengers" and the "King of the Messengers," which could have been read by Bakhtiar as a diminution, or "bastardization" of the station of Muhammad.

¹³⁸ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 2: 84-85.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, Reel 24: 410-11.

In the provinces, the security forces were similarly successful in their ongoing disciplining of the Islamic movement, with only rare, abortive resistance. In Tabriz, for example, a June article in *Payam-e Azerbaijan* attempted to “out” the governor-general’s chief advisor as a Baha’i. As a result, all copies of the offending issue were immediately confiscated by security forces, the paper lost its license, and the editor was arrested for several days.¹⁴⁰ As a result of continuous pressure of this sort, by Ashura the population was well-disciplined by the state, and processions were subdued and limited. There was strong recognition that any form of demonstration, particularly of an anti-Baha’i nature, would not be tolerated, and none occurred. The only disturbance that year took place for unrelated reasons, when two processions met from opposite directions and got into a scuffle over who had precedence. Previously, such battles for prestige had ended in fatalities, but there was little prestige to fight over during the depressed 1956 commemoration, and the episode passed with nominal drama.¹⁴¹

Mashhad, 1956

In 1956, the issue of self-flagellation was again fetishized in Mashhad and used as an indicator of the extent to which the clergy was under control. And, again, there was a security “failure” due to the government’s internal conflicts and inefficiencies. The first major misstep involved the decision, shortly before Moharram, to replace Governor-General Ram, since he was too sympathetic to the clergy. The new governor-general, Farokh, was under orders to prohibit self-flagellation, but did not know how to accomplish this, being newly-installed right before Ashura and hearing from the chief of

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., Reel 1: 50.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., Reel 2: 263.

police and others that it was too late to do anything about that year's celebrations.

Despite these handicaps, Farokh's inability to reverse Ram's tolerance on this matter was interpreted by some in the military, and by American observers, as showing lamentable indecision "before the entreaties and threats of the mullahs."¹⁴²

The head of the gendarmerie, disregarding the governor's hesitancy, ordered his troops to enforce the ban on self-flagellation in the rural areas. This confusion over the government's attitude was heightened by Tehran's intrusion at the last minute, instructing General Sardadvar—on the seventh day of Moharram (August 14)—to not allow any self-flagellation while at the same time telling the governor-general that he was free to allow or disallow the practice, and it was his decision. On August 15, the eighth day of Moharram and the beginning of activities, the governor-general received word from Tehran that he was to ban the practice, and the issue was no longer up to his personal discretion. Given the miscommunications and chaotic environment, the new governor-general decided to allow the ritual, since a change at the last possible occasion would only lead to confusion and violence. Thousands again ecstatically participated in the ritual of collective suffering through self-flagellation and other forms of self-cutting. In addition to the slicing of the arms and back and head, some even inserted padlocks through their muscles. There were two near-fatalities and for three days the hospitals were busy attending to serious injuries. According to one observer, "the observances this year were bigger and better than ever."¹⁴³

¹⁴² Ibid., 257.

¹⁴³ Ibid., 258.

In response to this display of religiosity in Mashhad, in violation of Tehran's last-minute instructions, General Moqadam, the national Chief of Police, was dispatched to enforce stricter discipline. In General Moqadam's opinion:

Fanaticism is contrary to the tenets of Islam... Religious teachings and dogma should be brought up-to-date to appeal to all classes. It should be in tune with modern-day life. Educated people cannot accept the reactionary principles advocated by many of the clergy, which is a hold-over from Safavid times. The Government is determined to stop these practices... The manner in which to correct these deficiencies is to guide the mullahs toward more enlightened views. Since the Quran is most adaptable to these exigencies, their ideas and presentations will gradually be improved so that they will be more in accordance with the tenets of modern life.¹⁴⁴

During his mission to see that Mashhad more closely followed the new direction of the central government, General Moqadam expressed displeasure at Governor-General Farrokh's "weak stand." To show how he believed the government should treat clerical sensibilities, he ordered that the cinemas, which had been closed in deference to the holy month, be immediately re-opened, and let it be known that there was to be a "firm policy" of non-appeasement. He met with the city's ayatollahs, was "very firm" and told them that unless they did whatever the government asked, "he would tie their hands behind their backs, like bandits, and take them to Tehran."¹⁴⁵

The Baha'is of Mashhad

Despite the security "failure" in Mashhad, it should be pointed out that there was no anti-Baha'i violence there during the holy months of 1956. Although the disciplining of the clergy began the previous year in order to prevent anti-Baha'i violence, the issue of self-

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 259.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid.

flagellation completely eclipsed this concern, and anti-Baha'ism, or its prevention, fell off the radar. Even the Mashhadi Baha'is themselves reported that their biggest problem was not the clerics, but rather the security forces' ongoing occupation of their school and local center.

Since the holy city of Mashhad houses the Shrine of Imam Ali Reza, it is a center of pilgrimage and has a reputation for conservatism. As such, the twenty-five hundred Mashhadi Baha'is "have been forced to be even more discreet than in the rest of Iran." Despite this caution, which precluded direct visits to the Consulate, arrangements were made to interview two prominent local Baha'is, Mr. Javad Quchani (a high school teacher still employed by the state despite the supposed dismissal of Baha'is) and Dr. Eshrag (a wealthy physician). Both individuals had been members of the Local Spiritual Assembly that administered the affairs of the city's Baha'i community. In their view, "the Baha'is in Khorasan have always made a practice of being as inconspicuous as possible since Meshed is the site of the holiest Shia shrine in Iran." They managed to avoid incidents and "have been particularly discreet since the anti-Bahai campaign." As part of this ongoing attempt to avoid notice, the local Baha'i center was not prominent like the Tehran headquarters, and instead had been "located on a back street off Jannat Street," next to which they maintained a small school inside of an inconspicuous four-room house. During the previous year's Ramadan pogrom, both properties were seized by security forces. In the year since then there had been no indication that the properties would be returned. No compensation had been given, and the furniture and other

valuables housed within the properties had been taken away and used to redecorate the local army headquarters.¹⁴⁶

When asked about the composition of the community, the Consulate was informed that “some are flour mill owners or shopkeepers, others doctors, photographers, teachers and mechanics.”¹⁴⁷ In addition, the community used to include two prominent brothers, landlord Hosein Ghani and Professor Ghasem Ghani. Hosein Ghani owned a number of cotton gins in Mashhad and throughout the region and was an avowed Baha’i until a recent conversion to Islam—although most Mashhadis doubted that this was sincere and saw him as a crypto-Baha’i seeking to avoid anti-Baha’i hostility that might threaten his continued prosperity. His late brother, Dr. Ghasem Ghani, was a former Cabinet member and member of the Shah’s traveling entourage. He had also taught Persian at Columbia and was in the Iranian delegation at the founding of the United Nations. Apparently, Ghasem Ghani had a Baha’i identity earlier in his life but abandoned or dissimulated this identity later in life.¹⁴⁸ There were also numerous Baha’is in the gendarmerie as well as many Baha’i officers among the military forces stationed in the area (who were not included in the reported 2,500 Baha’is in the city, due to their impermanence). The defining characteristic of this relatively affluent community was that, unlike the illiteracy of the general population, they were “100% literate.” This was described as an indication of the “predominantly middle class appeal of the Bahai creed,” since the educated middle class were “shut out of the closely-interrelated aristocracy” but

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 175.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid.

¹⁴⁸ Ghani’s family now denies his Baha’i identity. See Cyrus Ghani’s *A Man of Many Worlds: The Memoirs of Dr. Ghasem Ghani* (Washington, D.C.: Mage Publishers, 2006). The American Consulate in Mashhad, however, considered Professor Ghani to have been a Baha’i, and only mention conversion to Islam in connection with his brother, Hosein. Even this was regarded with suspicion and said to have only occurred “recently,” i.e. most likely a conversion of convenience after the 1955 pogrom.

could instead find a shared community and upwardly-mobile worldview through “the ideals of Baha’ism.”¹⁴⁹

When asked if Baha’is had really been dismissed as promised by the government the previous year, Quchani and Eshrag claimed that this was not really enforced and that the matter had been dropped by both the government and the clergy after the previous year’s partial dismissals. They claimed that out of all the Baha’i officers that they were aware of in the area, none had been fired, although some had been transferred and some had quit. Of the thirty Baha’is employed by the Department of Education, fourteen were dismissed, while the majority remained.¹⁵⁰

“Centuries and civilizations apart”: Ashura in South Tehran, 1957

Despite nominal anti-Baha’i threats, pressure continued to be applied to the ulama in 1957. The focus shifted, however, to the larger issues of “progress” and the path that Iran needed to take to satisfy American demands that fanaticism be firmly dealt with as a prerequisite for reform and for continued American faith in the Shah’s government. In this context, rituals like self-flagellation during Ashura, which have no direct connection to vigilance on the anti-Baha’i front, were nevertheless again thrown into the mix as part of an ever-growing definition of the “firm” steps that the Shah needed to take against the clergy. The Shah was made to retain “the knowledge that modern day nations do not permit these barbaric practices” but instead exhibit “revulsion towards fanaticism,” for “too powerful a reactionary clergy bodes ill for the Nation.”¹⁵¹

¹⁴⁹ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 2: 176.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 257.

Although typically less hands-on than their American counterparts, the British were similarly concerned about clerical discipline and returning the clergy to its “place.” In connection with this, arrangements were made for a representative to witness and report on Tehran’s security arrangements for the 1957 Ashura commemoration. On the holy day, J.W. Russell, along with his wife in full chador, a plainclothes police inspector, and a local tough employed by a labor boss who helped organize the Ashura processions in Southern Tehran, all set off to the south of the city to observe the event.

In his fascinating report, Russell begins by pointing out that the Shah’s father had “greatly disliked anything [like Ashura] which smacked of the picturesque and unprogressive past, [and] did his best to put an end to the whole thing.” He noted that Mohammad Reza Shah, although at first allowing the return of prohibited rituals early in his reign, had now greatly restrained them. He expressed approval that there was no longer any self-cutting, unlike previous years, when one would see “a man snap a padlock shut through his biceps!”¹⁵² In the collective mourning, he noted, participants used to draw blood freely before the new policy, “but now the police (and military police) with fixed bayonets who march with each group control this strictly and curb the more violent excesses... At the end of the mourning you see a good many of the chain men with bare backs like pieces of raw beef, but it is rare nowadays to see blood actually flowing.”¹⁵³ Still, he faulted the Shah for continuing to allow the “emotional release” of other Ashura rituals that his father had forbidden, and was confused because “Persians as a whole dislike and despise the Arabs and it is curious and illogical that they should mourn with such violence the death of a remote Bedouin Sheikh [Husayn].” Eventually,

¹⁵² TNAPRO, FO 371 / 127139 / EP 1781 / 3, Russel, “Moharram in Tehran: August 1957,” September 7, 1957.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

he concluded that “in reality they are mourning the architect of the Great Schism, who gave them over the years some sort of spiritual independence from the conquerors.”¹⁵⁴

Russell reported that he was lucky enough to see Shaban Jafari—better known as Shaban “the Brainless” (*bimokh*)—during the processions. Shaban was perhaps the most infamous tough used during the 1953 coup. He was “a vast oafish giant of a man about seven feet tall, with shoulders and arms like a gorilla, and more than one assassination to his credit.” But at this point, he had become involved in the women’s suffrage movement and was also spotted “in the improbable costume of a Scout master.” Russel found this kind of people watching, and the general atmosphere of the south of the city, to be far more interesting than the religious events, since “most of the sermons are revivalist stuff of a high emotional and low intellectual standard.”¹⁵⁵ In his opinion:

...the greatest fascination in this spectacle was the revelation of a world new to me in the heart of the city where we live and have our being; but of which we know so small a part. The Tehran that we saw on the Tenth of Muharram is a different world, centuries and civilizations apart from the gaudy, superficial botch of Cadillacs, hotels, antiques-shops, villas, tourists and diplomats, where we run our daily round. The Shah, Point IV and the Seven-Year Plan have little place in this close world of dusty alleys that lie between the bazaar and the birch-fields. But it is not only poverty, ignorance and dirt that distinguish the old south of the city from its parvenu north. The slums have a compact self-conscious unity and communal sense that is totally lacking in the smart districts of chlorinated water, macadamed roads and (fitful) street lighting. The bourgeois does not know his neighbor: the slum-dweller is intensely conscious of his. And in the slums the spurious blessings of Pepsi-Cola civilization have not yet destroyed the old way of life, where every man’s comfort and security depend on the spontaneous, unpoliced observation of a traditional code. Down in the Southern part of the city manners and morals are better and stricter than in the Villas of Tajrieh...And

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. Obviously, Russel is ignorant of the history of Shi’ism. I am not citing him for his accuracy or expertise, but for the openness with which he expresses his biased interpretation of Iran’s past, present, and future. Other diplomats (such as Wright, Stevens, and Fearnley, who I cite for factual information) are more informed than Russel. They share his hostility towards Islam, but are more restrained in their writing and do not broadcast their rationale as openly as Russel does. American attitudes are discussed in the following chapter.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid.

against the outside world—which includes all Tehran north of Gulestan—the front is close and firm.¹⁵⁶

To support his argument about Southern Tehran, Russell uses the example of the “communist adventurer” Khosre Ruzbeh, who was openly living in the southern slums for seven years even though he was wanted for half-a-dozen murders and there was a reward on his head. Still, in Southern Tehran

...no-one betrayed him: whatever his politics he was one of them: he belonged: it was his town... [Unfortunately] all this, I suppose, will go soon, as education, hygiene and a higher standard of living begin to penetrate the foetid alleys of the slums...[but] perhaps, though, it no longer has a place in a city now at last emerging from the Oriental Middle Age.¹⁵⁷

In his romanticized and condescending descriptions, Russel writes as if he made his journey in a time machine rather than an automobile. For him, the south of the city represented a living museum, a window into a romanticized past that inexplicably persisted in pockets into modern times, but which would soon disappear with the spread of modernity. These “relics” of the past are treated as a source of nostalgia, but also as a source of fear and revulsion. For him, whatever benefits the south of the city had, this was irrelevant as progress was perceived, in Hegelian terms, as unidirectional, moving from magic to religion to the age of science, or “Pepsi-Cola civilization,” as Russel terms it (interestingly so, given that the Pepsi brand has Baha’i connotations in Iran, since an Iranian Baha’i ran the franchise). As a result of the wholesale acceptance of the myth of unidirectional “progress,” he is able to, without a second thought, link the introduction of hygiene to the willingness to sell out a neighbor for money.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid.

It is also worth noticing that the South is described as not simply being “medieval” or in the “Middle Ages,” but rather as being in the “*Oriental Middle Age*.” The implication being that while for Europe the Middle Ages was a specific, concluded period, in the Middle East the “Middle Age” was a state of civilization that was disconnected from any specific historic period, and which was instead measured by the degree of Westernization. Whereas in Europe, “Middle” referred to the period between the classical and the modern, in Iran the “middle” referred to the period between ancient Iranian civilization (i.e. the pre-Islamic) and the emerging Westernized client state (post-Islamic). That is to say, the “middle” or “medieval” was actually a euphemism for Islam and a pejorative that simultaneously marked it as civilizationally inferior, barbaric, doomed to expiration, and chronologically displaced from the modern world, in which it was felt to have no place.

“How much better it was to act civilized”: Mashhad, 1957

Following the failure to fully discipline Mashhadi clergy in the first two years of the anti-clerical initiative, Tehran was eager to prevent a hat trick. They managed to accomplish this through an unprecedented security push in the holy city. As a result, Ashura in 1957 was a somber and temperate affair, despite the record number of fifty to sixty thousand pilgrims. It took place “without the usual high religious feeling and self-flagellation” that had existed every year since 1941. Very few onlookers were allowed to gaze on the processions and, instead, police and army troops lined every route and participants were “shunted in and out of the Shrine expeditiously and then dispersed.” As a result, “the ardour of the groups was considerably dimmed.” A few individuals encouraged self-

flagellation despite the troop presence, but they were immediately seized and imprisoned. Further back, tanks were manned and “strategically stationed” at Chahar Bagh Square, near the American consulate, and at the square leading to the Shrine, in order to show that the government would not negotiate or equivocate.¹⁵⁸

In this context,

There was much less lamenting and breast-beating.... [And] it became apparent that the government’s policy of non-flagellation prevailed this year after failing the past two years. The power of the mullahs [in Mashhad] was broken for the first time since Mohamed Reza Shah has taken the mantle of power over from his megalomaniac father.¹⁵⁹

Although some of those Mashhadis who were opposed to traditional “excesses” were grateful and self-congratulatory for having a “bloodless wake” and “agreed how much better it was to act more civilized,” the success of the Ashura measures was something of a surprise to the regime, given the events earlier in the year.¹⁶⁰ In the months leading up to the Moharram “test,” religious sensibilities had been enraged and it was widely assumed that the “powder keg might explode.”¹⁶¹ This danger was enhanced by the long-awaited completion of the Mashhad-Tehran railway, which further raised the danger level because, although it facilitated the easy introduction of tanks and outside troops, it also allowed outside agitators ease of access to the city.

The controversies in Mashhad included persistent rumors about Jews kidnapping Muslim children and selling them to Americans and others to experiment on. It took the intervention of Bakhtiar’s intelligence forces stop the publication and circulation of such

¹⁵⁸ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 3: 211.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 212.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 211.

reports.¹⁶² Another cause of controversy was the May 26 “toilet Koran” incident. This occurred when numerous Qur’ans were found at the bottom of a large public toilet near the Shrine, immersed in feces. The incident was used by Ayatollah Kafai’s camp in order to embarrass, and force the removal of, the anti-clerical administrator, Dr. Shademan, who was the Shah’s appointee and representative at the Shrine. Surprisingly, Shademan won this contest, leaving the ayatollah “somewhat shaken and chastised.” Kafai’s loss of face, and the toilet incident in general, was an object lesson that shook the city’s clergy and likely “affected their morale and will to resist.”¹⁶³

Following this incident, General Bakhtiar himself came to Mashhad to reinforce the call for firmness made earlier by his rival, Moqadam. He came with orders to finally and decisively prevent clerical “excesses” in Mashhad during Ashura. With the arrival of Bakhtiar himself, it was felt that the tide would turn, since “mullahs are notorious for their propensity to stay in the background at the first sign of trouble—in contrast to their beloved Hosein.”¹⁶⁴

¹⁶² Ibid., Reel 11: 338.

¹⁶³ Ibid., Reel 3: 5-7, 93-94, 211-12. The old Qur’ans were apparently disposed of in this way because of the laziness of workers at the Shrine, who sought to avoid the hassle of the Islamic rules regarding the proper disposal of copies of the Qur’an. When the soiled Qur’ans were found, Ayatollah Kafai and dozens of religious students spent two days cleaning the fecal material off of the Qur’ans so that they could be disposed of properly, wailing and lamenting while they worked. Dr. Shademan insisted that Ayatollah Kafai’s son was behind the incident, because his father was insulted that his allowance had been lowered and he hoped to embarrass Shademan and have him removed. Kafa’i’s son denied these charges, “although not very convincingly.” At a meeting at the governor-general’s office to resolve the matter, those present (including detectives on loan from Tehran, Iran’s deputy police chief, and the city’s leading ayatollahs) “agreed that the best solution would be to find some mentally incompetent person, put the blame on him and shunt him off to some inaccessible place. Witnesses would be obtained to substantiate that such a person had, in fact, done the deed.” Kafai publicized this discovery of the “guilty” party through telegrams to Borujerdi and Behbehani, which blamed “some insane person.” A local man of ill means was put forward as the scapegoat and admitted into an asylum, although this plan ran into difficulties when the doctor examining him refused to find him insane. Later, there were rumors that the British were behind the toilet incident, and further rumors that “the Americans had instigated the Bahais to perform the deed with Dr. Shademan as an accomplice.”

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

While congratulating himself over his role in the success during Ashura, Governor-General Farokh pointed out how difficult his task had been, as he was following a weak and vacillating man. He claimed that Ram had so empowered the clergy that they at first failed to recognize that the tide had changed and were completely disregarding the government's insistence on banning self-flagellation during Ashura, instead buying white clothes (used to dramatically highlight and display the blood spilled by the wearer), as well as swords and other equipment. Moreover, Farokh claimed that he achieved this victory despite being surrounded by people who "lacked confidence and were unsure of their capabilities in enforcing the ban." But, as a result of the clergy's humiliation and loss of face during Ashura, he felt that "the government will have less trouble in the future enforcing its will...The power of the mullahs has suffered a blow." Dr. Shademan also gloated over the cowing of those who had attempted to frame him over the "toilet Qur'ans" incident, and expressed pleasure that they had been "put in their place" and their power "shattered." Even the American consulate joined in the backslapping, declaring that "the imposed peace was delightful."¹⁶⁵

"Completely cowed": the emergence of SAVAK

In 1957-58, the informal intelligence and security services that had been operating under the direction of General Bakhtiar during the 1953-5 repression of Tudeh and the post-1955 repression of the clergy became formalized with the creation of SAVAK. This infamous organization, also known as the National Intelligence and Security Organization (*Sazeman-e Ettela'at va Amniyat-e Keshvar*), was led by General Bakhtiar from its inception until the Shah turned against Bakhtiar in 1961. Although this new

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 213.

organization was an expansion of the security initiatives between 1953 and 1957, the new organization allowed for greater reach, resources, training, manpower, and efficiency. Moreover, the organization benefited from training by Mossad and the CIA, which regularized and greatly enhanced the professionalism and coercive capabilities of Iran's security forces.

This enhanced espionage training was obviously useful, but the formal creation of SAVAK provided a number of more mundane, but necessary, resources, such as office space. In the years immediately before the creation of SAVAK, for example, General Bakhtiar largely directed the nationwide effort to discipline the clergy from out of the Baha'i National Center, which his men had occupied since 1955. He had agreed to return this building after the end of martial law, but did not follow through on this. His excuse for maintaining the property was that he needed the office space and that he kept his intelligence files and "personal dossiers" there.¹⁶⁶ He was very much opposed to the American insistence that the building be returned, and instead wanted to use the National Baha'i Center as his permanent office, renovate it, and use it as the headquarters of the newly-created SAVAK. His desire to usurp the property was understandable, since this imposing structure was reportedly worth millions when it was seized.¹⁶⁷ Upon hearing of the planned reconstruction of the property, Colonel Khosrovani (a Baha'i and the wealthy head of a sports club) tried to save the property by offering to buy it. He wished to use it as a business place rather than see the landmark renovated for Bakhtiar's use.¹⁶⁸ This

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., Reel 24: 425.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 326. Presently, this building is being used to house one of the sub-offices of the present regime's Department of Islamic Propaganda (Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat-e Hojjat al-Islam Falsafi*, p. 165 n4).

¹⁶⁸ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 425.

was ultimately unnecessary, however, as American pressure eventually secured the return of the property to the Baha'i community.¹⁶⁹

Moharram 1958 was the first Ashura commemoration since the full establishment of SAVAK and, with that year's coup in Iraq, the new intelligence agency was eager to prove itself. Even in 1957, before the formal establishment of SAVAK, there had been no anti-Baha'i violence or objectionable ritual excess, so there was a conscious attempt to go even further in 1958 and ensure that under SAVAK clerics were "completely cowed."¹⁷⁰ Although the situation in Iraq strengthened this resolve, the plan for a demonstration of power during Moharram was initiated before the coup and fit into the ongoing disciplining of the clergy treated above.

As part of the management of Moharram, there were orders "to permit no disturbances, parades, or public flagellations," and "the orders were thoroughly carried out." In Abadan, for example, the result was a "morgue-like stillness" in which believers were only allowed on the street in order to attend mosque and then return home.¹⁷¹ When the mayor expressed his fear that the transformation to a police state would provoke rather than restrain the masses, this was rejected by the American Consulate who very much approved of the new show of strength vis-à-vis the clerics.

To keep participants in the allowed, temperate processions in line, religious leaders were forced to sign sworn statements promising not to engage in prohibited

¹⁶⁹ At a breakfast meeting on May 28 (1957), General Bakhtiar explained to American officers that the Tehran Baha'i Center, which he had held for over two years and was scheduled to have been returned ten days before the meeting, would instead be returned ten days later. There was limited transfer of possession earlier, but an army sentry was placed in front of the property and there was the condition that Baha'is were not to engage in "public demonstrations" on the property. This condition was felt to be purely academic, since this large center located off of Takht-e Jamshid had never been used for demonstrations of any kind and the only large crowds there were for conventions (in which the Baha'is' National Spiritual Assembly was elected) and for sports matches (Ibid., Reel 11: 338.).

¹⁷⁰ Ibid., Reel 24: 448.

¹⁷¹ Ibid., 446.

excess. Clerics were sternly threatened with harsh consequences for “fanatical excess,” and SAVAK conducted extensive spying on all religious leaders and organizations, while the police and military jointly supervised the public proceedings.¹⁷² Government officials were, for the first time, no longer allowed to participate in religious processions, while religious leaders who refused to sign agreements not to engage in “excessive” religiosity were imprisoned. Security forces were stationed throughout the city, were instructed to use their bayonets on violators, and they enforced these orders “as if their very futures depended on it—which was no doubt the case.” At every religious gathering, in the background “the hand of the government (SAVAK) was obvious.” With this new tough attitude, the government finally showed to Western satisfaction “that it was willing to knock heads and put people in jail to enforce its policy.”¹⁷³

The groups most negatively impacted by the new security regime during Ashura were those who were deprived of ritual-based income, many of whom now became dependent on government bribes. This suited official plans, since “by keeping them in its pay by opening up the cash boxes at... the SAVAK office,” the government “has shown that it intends to dominate the mullas.”¹⁷⁴ Through this strategy, many clerics and lesser religious figures became de facto employees of the government, following its instructions and feeding it information. Even Ayatollah Kafai (Khurasani) acted as an informant for SAVAK, feeding the agency information on which of his followers expressed approval of the fall of the Iraqi monarchy.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid., 448.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 449.

SAVAK's management of Moharram continued in 1959 and security forces were able to maintain "strict control" despite the unusually large crowds (since those who would have gone to Najaf and Karbala were now compelled to stay home due to the difficulties traveling to Iraq). Despite the crowds, observances were "even more restricted than last year."¹⁷⁶ Security details were placed on every train, on every street used by the processions, and at every religious building. There were also additional allotments of troops to protect foreigners and other targets.

As a result of SAVAK's infiltration, observation, and system of informants, threats to Jewish and Baha'i interests were discovered early and dealt with through the deployment of additional troops tasked with protecting these minorities.¹⁷⁷ Even before SAVAK, the security forces' post-1955 focus on the clerics made it almost impossible for any organized anti-Baha'i campaign to reemerge (as evidenced by the aforementioned series of abortive attempts); with the emergence of SAVAK, such developments became impossible.

In response to this new climate, anti-Bahai activities took place primarily through the Hojjatiyeh Association from the late 1950s until shortly after the 1979 Revolution. This group (discussed in the following chapter) had a non-violent agenda aimed at peacefully blocking conversion to Baha'ism and convincing Baha'is to "return" to Islam. It went through the appropriate channels and received SAVAK approval, with the understanding that opposition remain strictly non-violent and "cultural."¹⁷⁸ With this shift, we see that even anti-Baha'ism became nationalized and subsumed under state control, in sanitized form.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 461.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 447.

¹⁷⁸ Jafarian, *Jaryanha va Sazmanha*, pp. 168, 373, 374 n2.

Under SAVAK's direction, restrictions on Shi'ite public ritual were increasingly accompanied by the use of state propaganda that claimed that the religious practices targeted by the government were actually "inimical to the precepts of Islam."¹⁷⁹ Not only was this rhetoric ineffectual and patronizing, but it usurped the clerical prerogative to determine what was and was not "Islamic" and arrogated it to the state. This nationalization of the ability to speak for Islam was different from what occurred under Reza Shah, when Shi'ite identity was marked as opposed to national identity, and many symbols of Shi'ism (such as Islamic dress) and many of the functions of the clergy (such as education and law) were replaced by newly created national symbols (such as the Pahlavi cap) and national institutions (such as state schools), through coercion.¹⁸⁰ Mohammad Reza Shah was not attempting this. The government's new plan was not to excise Shi'ism, but to instead slowly replace traditional, "reactionary" Shi'ism with a "modern" and passive variant that could be co-opted by the state and used to promote a Shah-centered nationalism. This attempt to nationalize and control Islam and its traditional institutions actually has more in common with the policies of Nasser, the Shah's contemporary and rival, than it did with those of his father.¹⁸¹

In the 1959 Moharram commemorations, this co-option and re-purposing of the clergy was further expanded. SAVAK expressed a strong desire to make use of the sufficiently "cowed" ulama by using them as instruments of state propaganda during the holy month. Before the beginning of Moharram, for example, General Bakhtiar visited the previously defiant Mashhad to meet with the leading clerics and make arrangements

¹⁷⁹ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 447.

¹⁸⁰ See Appendix II.

¹⁸¹ In Egypt, this state co-option of traditional Sunni institutions (such as al-Azhar) eventually contributed to the rise of alternative Islamic movements opposed to the state, and the same occurred in Iran, although with very different results due to the differences between the regimes and due to differences in the dynamics of religious authority in Sunnism and Shi'ism.

for what they were to say. Leading clerics were made to stress love for the Shah and hatred of the Soviets, and this was broadcast on state radio. All major clerical addresses were at least partially scripted by SAVAK.¹⁸²

Conclusion

Mohammad Reza Shah's turn against the clergy, at first glance, seems similar to his father's anti-clerical action a generation before, especially given the key oppositional role played by Mashhad in both instances. The similarities were superficial, however, as Reza Shah's anti-clerical efforts were undertaken as a relatively free agent, in emulation of Ataturk, and with a genuine disdain for the religious class. His son, on the other hand, had a laissez-faire attitude towards the clergy for the first dozen years of his reign, allowing the reversal of most of the religious restrictions that had been put in place during his father's time and, with the Mosaddeq crisis, he even came to rely on the traditional clergy as his most important domestic supporters, to whom he was indebted for the important roles that they played in the plot to restore him to power in 1953. Unlike his father, Mohammad Reza Shah's turn against the clergy was not (at first) motivated by deep personal beliefs or any guiding ideology. He turned against them because his patrons told him to do so and warned him of the devastating politico-economic consequences of non-compliance. Whereas Reza Shah was the driving force behind his anti-clerical policies, Mohammad Reza Shah was an insecure and confused participant in an anti-clerical agenda that was foisted on his regime by its foreign patrons, with the young Shah often expressing unease and unsuccessfully suggesting delay or compromise (at least in the early period).

¹⁸² USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 462-3.

It was in this context that what began in 1955 as a Western attempt to end embarrassing communal violence in a key client state developed, by the end of the decade, into a far more important series of policy shifts relating to Iran's internal religious policy. The initial pressure that was applied to the Shah's government in order to suppress the clergy vis-à-vis the Baha'i issue snowballed as time went on until it included a push for a more wholesale disciplining of the clergy, for their removal from politics and public space, and for their eventual inclusion as "cowed" mouthpieces for the regime, by the end of the decade. This series of events contributed to the development of many of the most defining—and eventually damning—features of the Pahlavi state, including the expansion of General Bakhtiar's informal intelligence forces into the large, efficient, and bureaucratized secret police upon which the regime came to rely for its survival.

It was, moreover, this taming of the Right, added to the earlier suppression of the Left, which provided the rationale for pushing ahead with the series of nationwide reforms that began in 1959 and which were eventually formalized and expanded in 1963 as the "White Revolution." The anti-clerical implications of this program were serious enough to cause the ulama to return to large-scale anti-government protests. This return to public revolt, which will be explored in the following chapter, was sparked by the White Revolution, but this was not its origin. Rather, this explosion of dissent developed out of a very specific context which must be understood if one is to accurately assess the clerical anger that fed into these developments. Khomeini's early political rhetoric (against the Americans, the Baha'is, and the regime) was more than just paranoia-laced appeals to xenophobia and communalism; these emotive appeals spoke to the years of

frustration, suppression, and betrayal experienced by his generation. This chapter has attempted to get at this crucial context by de-centering the Shah-clergy binary and instead foregrounding the extent to which this interaction was shaped by Iran's patron-client relationship.

CHAPTER VIII

“I Am Reza Shah!”: Revolution from Above, Revolt from Below, 1959-1965

Introduction

When Mohammad Reza Shah began to assume direct control of Iran in 1955, he finally stood up to his mother. During a heated conversation with her he “banged his fist on the table and shouted: ‘I will be Reza Shah! I am Reza Shah!’”¹ This desire to emulate his father’s legacy can most clearly be seen several years further into his dictatorship, in the Shah’s ambitious series of reforms known collectively as the “White Revolution,” later renamed as the “Shah and People Revolution.” While Reza Shah’s initiatives suppressed surface-level markers of Muslim identity, his son’s reform program was seen to threaten the very foundation of Islam in Iran. The “White Revolution” initially involved six points (later expanded to nineteen) and while some of them were innocuous (such as the nationalization of forests) others, like land reform, were seen to directly threaten the ulama by removing income derived from endowments and by weakening the power of the traditional elite. Other reforms, such as the enfranchisement of women, were seen as patently anti-Islamic measures, were marked as “Baha’i,” and were perceived to be part of a larger attempt to do away with Islam and the ulama.

¹ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 6: 74-76.

Although the White Revolution was not formally initiated until 1963, the two most controversial elements (land reform and the enfranchisement of women) were raised in the majles in 1959. These issues caused Ayatollah Borujerdi to return to the political realm, uniting the clergy and successfully forcing the Shah to indefinitely delay his plans.

After Borujerdi died in 1961, these issues and others were reintroduced in 1962 and 1963, with the ulama again rallying in opposition. In this second wave, Khomeini became famous for his caustic criticism of the regime and for his subsequent intransigence, even after facing imprisonment and exile. Khomeini's growing network of supporters then developed a military wing, which attracted former members of the Fedai'yan-e Islam. One of these Fedai's-turned-Khomeinists killed Prime Minister Mansur in 1965. Supposedly etched into the assassin's gun was the message: "Islamic government must be created."²

Whereas previous chapters discuss the imagining of the limits of the "Islamic nation" that was said to constitute Iran, this chapter explores the early articulation of this nation's claim to "sovereignty." I argue that the clerical opposition in this period was in many ways a continuation of developments that began in the preceding two decades. In particular, I discuss the continued importance of anti-Baha'ism as a unifying element and a potent rallying cry, the continuation of the turn against the clergy that initially began following the 1955 pogrom, and the significance of the staging of the 1963 uprising in Moharram, in light of the repression in Moharram discussed in the previous chapter.

Before exploring more explicit confrontations with the state, I discuss the "loathing" beneath Borujerdi's quietude and I explore the Hojjatiyeh Society as an

² Ruhollah Khomeini, *Kauthar*, Vol. 1 (Teheran: The Institute for the Compilation and Publication of the Works of Imam Khomeini, 1995), p. 237 n5.

example of passive resistance that worked to promote an exclusivist, Shi'ite sense of national identity. I also address the positivist roots of reform efforts, which were rooted in the shift in American foreign policy that occurred following the 1955 pogrom. The rest of the chapter proceeds in roughly chronological order, exploring key episodes of clerical opposition while paying special attention to the continued importance of anti-Baha'ism up until the uprising of Moharram 1963. After these revolts were put down with a great deal of bloodshed, this founding tragedy was discursively integrated into Khomeinism in a way that largely effaced the early importance of the Baha'i issue, and acted as a new rallying cry with which to create a united front.

“Loathing for the system”

After his loss of face in 1955, Borujerdi largely abandoned efforts to force the government to take action against the Baha'is. This left only three options for those who wished to continue the anti-Baha'i struggle: operate through peaceful and SAVAK-approved groups like the Hojjatiyeh (discussed below), defy Borujerdi and engage in autonomous anti-Baha'i efforts that would likely lead to a visit by SAVAK, or stew impatiently while remaining loyal to Borujerdi. A number of future revolutionaries fell into the third group.³

Khomeini later claimed that, during the period after the anti-Baha'i pogrom of 1955, “I went every day to encourage His Holiness’s anti-Baha'i activity in order to rid

³ I am focusing on the Baha'i issue, but there were—of course—clerics who were not interested in this issue. There were also a number of other major areas of concern (such as Israel and American policy) that many considered more important. Over time, many of these currents bled into each other, as discussed below.

the administration of Baha'is, but by the following day he had gone cold on the issue."⁴ This sense of hopelessness—which had been building in Borujerdi since the early attempts at lobbying the regime discussed in Chapter III—was intensified because of the reification of the idea that Iranian Baha'is were protected by foreign powers. Jafarian, for example, expresses the persistent clerical view that, “without a doubt” Baha'is were protected after 1955 because the government “was under pressure from America and the Bahai-protecting Zionists.” For this reason, “the Baha'is were the only group that the government did not clash with.” Instead, he claims that the Baha'is' consolidation of power only increased after 1955.⁵

Despite his lack of active engagement with the state in the years immediately after 1955, Borujerdi called upon Muslims (including those in government) to shun the Baha'is economically and socially. In 1957, for example, he commands: “Muslims are required to give up their mixing together (*mokhaletah*), social intercourse (*mo'asherat*), and business dealings (*mo'ameleh*) with this sect.” But he insists: “I demand calm of Muslims, and that order is carefully preserved.”⁶ Although this approach demonstrates Borujerdi's persistent belief in loyal opposition to the Court, this *fatwa* was used by anti-regime activists to legitimize their actions, since the regime violated Borujerdi's ruling by continuing to do business with, and offer protection to, businesses run by Baha'is, such as the Iranian Pepsi franchise.⁷

Although Borujerdi's ongoing insistence on boycotts was ignored by most Iranians, it was very effective in areas where it was actively encouraged. Montazeri

⁴ Baqer Moin, *Khomeini: Life of the Ayatollah* (New York: I. B. Taurus, 1999), p. 67.

⁵ Jafarian, *Jaryanha*, p. 369.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 165.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 71-71.

relates that after an anti-Baha'i boycott had been successfully staged in Najafabad, the Baha'is of the city were forced to leave or go underground to "hide themselves from the public gaze." In other words, they were forced to retreat from an "out" to a closeted identity. They were still there, but because they no longer had a public existence Montazeri could claim that they had been "eliminated."⁸ The trauma of the 1955 pogrom and ongoing harassment and surveillance by the Hojjatiyeh caused a similar effect nationally, as Iranian Baha'is retreated from public space. A CIA report, for example, notes that, by the 1970s, the Baha'i community in Iran had become a closed community that "maintains a compartmented organization and considerable secrecy."⁹

British and American reports confirm that Borujerdi continued to refuse to have anything to do with the Shah in the late 1950s because of his failure to follow through on his agreement to Baha'i dismissals and his continued closeness to Dr. Ayadi, who accompanied him on almost every trip outside of Iran.¹⁰ In addition to the Baha'i issue, Borujerdi increasingly saw the regime as fundamentally unacceptable and un-Islamic because of its rigged elections, encouragement of women's rights, and the Shah "allowing" Queen Soraya to travel around Europe unaccompanied and scantily clad.

Borujerdi's souring on actively lobbying the state should not be read as an indication of good relations, as claimed by Akhavi.¹¹ Rather, it was a sign of profound alienation and was a rejection of the Shah. Borujerdi's student, Davani, shares that, although the government had promised to shut down the Baha'is, they instead shut down

⁸ Montazeri, *Khaterat*, pp. 94-96.

⁹ NFAC (CIA), "Iran after the Shah: An Intelligence Assessment," August 1978.

¹⁰ See, for example, FO 248 / 1565 / 1957.

¹¹ Akhavi, *Religion and Politics*, pp. 24, 102.

the Islamic organizations while properties were returned to Baha'is.¹² Falsafi made it clear that the anger of 1955 did not fade, as the ulama were not “content with just the destruction of the dome.” He blamed the failure to achieve satisfaction in this struggle on “the suppression of the feeble (*za'if*) Shah” who was “under the influence (*nofuz*) of the European and American Powers, that is to say, the true benefactors (*hamian-e vaq'i*) of the Baha'is—the 5th column of the foreigners in Iran.” As a result of this foreign intervention, the Shah “did not carry out what he promised.” Falsafi claims that his opposition to these imperial dictates caused the Shah to refuse to meet with him from that time onwards. He was also prevented from speaking in Masjed-e Shah during the holy months and was kept off of state radio until the Revolution of 1979. Falsafi was proud of the “blows” that he was able to level against the Baha'is, but indirectly accepted that his efforts ultimately failed, claiming that the Baha'is, who were “American and Zionist agents,” did not lose their grip on power in Iran until they were eradicated (*az bayn bordan*) after 1979, and thus prevented from creating a “second Palestine” for the Americans.¹³

According to Falsafi, after the failure of 1955, Borujerdi “never again trusted the government.” The Shah had “promised” that the clearing away of Baha'i structures “would be closely coordinated (*ham-ahang*) with the sermons that were broadcast over the radio,” but, instead, he later claimed to Borujerdi that he was “helpless” (*nachar*) in the face of Iran's obligation to its foreign patrons, who compelled him to protect the Baha'is. This attitude was immensely frustrating for Borujerdi, who was unable to achieve his goals despite his best efforts, and claimed: “This situation is unbearable for

¹² Davani, *Khaterat va Mobarezat*, p. 209 n.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp 209-10.

me!” In the years that followed, Falsafi notes Borujerdi’s ongoing anger at the hypocrisy of the government and its “capitulation to the colonization of the patrons of Baha’ism.” This led to his “loathing for the system of the time.” Falsafi claims that although Borujerdi continued to want to take action against the Baha’is in his final years, their “patrons in Europe and America were pressuring us so that we couldn’t deal with them.” As a result, Davani claims that the Grand Ayatollah fell into cynicism and despondency, and Falsafi reports that Borujerdi spent his final years with anxiety and irritation in his heart.¹⁴

The Hojjatiyeh Society

After the disciplining of the clergy following the 1955 pogrom, organized anti-Baha’i activities were largely limited to non-violent “cultural” efforts, carried out with governmental approval. The apolitical Hojjatiyeh Society was the most important channel for these efforts. Since the government would not contribute resources to the anti-Baha’i “battle,” the Hojjatiyeh developed their own Islamic “troops” to replace those of the state, gathered their own intelligence, and engaged in their own missions and operations against perceived threats to the (Shi’ite) nation. This society was originally known to its members as the Anjoman-e Zedd-e Baha’iyat (The Anti-Baha’i Society), but is now generally referred to as the Hojjatiyeh (a shortened version of the Benevolent Society of the Hidden Imam).¹⁵

The Society was formed in 1953 by Shaykh Mahmud Halabi (1900-1998) in order to combat the perceived Baha’i threat. In addition to opposing the Baha’is, the Society

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 210-11.

¹⁵ Fischer, *Debating Muslims*, p. 48.

was also very involved in the larger field of Islamic education. Before forming the Society, Halabi was very concerned with Islamic education and studied philosophy, literature, and religious education, in addition to jurisprudence. He gained notoriety in Mashhad for his efforts at Islamic propagation and anti-Baha'i activism in the years following the abdication of Reza Shah. As part of this attempt to promote and defend Islam, he joined with other Islamic activists and associations in the city to form a united front and "became systematized (*monazam*) in their opposition to Baha'ism." During the Mosaddeq period, Halabi became a "political cleric" and ran in the election for the 18th majles. He was not elected and, as a result, abandoned politics and moved to Tehran, where he formed the Hojjatiyeh.¹⁶

The Society reflected Halabi's rejection of politics as well as his earlier anti-Baha'i efforts in Mashhad, which had focused on the need to be comprehensive (*por damaneh*) and utilize systematic organizational procedures.¹⁷ Halabi saw the Baha'is as the greatest threat to Islam in Iran, surpassing Communism, and believed that Baha'is had to be "contained" or "eliminated."¹⁸ His fear of the Baha'i threat was partly rooted in his own exploration of the religion as a seminarian. Abbas Alawi, his close friend and fellow student, also investigated the religion and converted to the Baha'i Faith, which caused Halabi a great deal of distress and motivated him to work to inoculate Muslim youth against this temptation. He initially wanted to use seminarians in this battle, but when he

¹⁶ Jafarian, *Jaryanha*, pp. 370-1.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 372.

¹⁸ Vali and Zubaida, "Factionalism and Political Discourse in the Islamic Republic of Iran: The Case of the Hojjatiyeh Society," (*Economy and Society* 14, no. 2) p. 147.

failed to convince senior clerics, he recruited from the laity, a practice that he maintained even later when his organization had support from Borujerdi.¹⁹

The Hojjatiyeh gained popularity in Tehran and spread nationally with the assistance and backing of Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi. Large percentages of religious taxes were diverted to this society, whose main program involved instilling in the youth an extreme form of Shi'ism as well as an intense hatred for Baha'is and Leftists.²⁰

Falsafi was a prominent member of the Society and, in his orchestration of the anti-Baha'i pogrom, it was often Hojjatis who often led persecutions at the local level.²¹

According to a former member:

The late Ayatullah Borujerdi and the late Ayatullah Hakim and many other religious authorities endorsed the activities of the Society. The Society thus managed to expand. Some religious authorities even allocated a portion of the religious donations (the Imam's share) to the Society...Gradually it became organized at a national level, and since its struggle was against Baha'ism, a secret and organized sect, the need was felt to further organize the society.²²

The Hojjatiyeh recruited and unified a broad array of youth in a national struggle that instilled a certain brand of patriotic values, in the same way that institutions like the scouts or the army foster patriotism and nationalism. Indeed, the members of the Hojjatiyeh called themselves *Sarbaz-e Imam-e Zaman* (Soldiers of the Imam of the Age) and a former member has described their activities as "a kind of war."²³ The young "soldiers" in the Association not only trained against the Baha'is, but also received an

¹⁹ Mahmoud Sadri, "Hojjatiya," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Online Edition, 15 December 2004, available at <http://www.iranica.com/articles/hojjatiya>.

²⁰ Vali and Zubaida, "Factionalism," p. 148.

²¹ Michael Rubin, *Into the Shadows: Radical Vigilantes in Khatami's Iran* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2001), p. 13; Also see: A. William Samii, "Falsafi, Kashani, and the Baha'is," *Research Notes in Shaykhi, Babi and Baha'i Studies*, Vol. 2, no. 5 (August 1998). Accessed January 20, 2011. <http://www.h-net.org/~bahai/notes/vol2/falsafi.htm>.

²² Vali and Zubaida, "Factionalism," p. 148.

²³ Fischer and Abedi, *Debating Muslims*, p. 54.

extensive Islamic education and were taught sophisticated arguments against all varieties of “irreligion.” According to Jafarian, in addition to its role in the anti-Baha’i battle, the Hojjatiyeh was important because of its role in the intellectual nurturing (*tarbiyat-e fekri*) of those who were eventually involved in the 1979 Revolution.²⁴

As a result of the fresh and untraditional approach of the Society, and its advocacy of modern and scientific methods, it was especially appealing to young men who were entering the educated middle class but who came from a conservative background and wanted to find a way to maintain this identity. As Fischer and Abedi note, the local chapters of the Society were not led by clerics but by members of the educated middle and upper class, such as doctors and teachers.²⁵ As such, the conservative ‘Alavi school was a major recruiting ground. Jafarian describes this school as the “source” of many of the religious troops who would later lead the Islamic Revolution, after first passing through the Hojjatiyeh. Although the Hojjatiyeh was not itself active in the Revolution, many young men who later became revolutionaries used to count themselves among its “troops” and tried out (*tajrobeh kardan*) Halabi’s organization before joining the combatant organizations.²⁶

In Abedi’s version of his time with the Society, we see how the violent anti-Baha’ism discussed in Chapter III is now channeled into a more systematic and sophisticated strategy for responding to the perceived Baha’i threat in ways that would not lead to disorder or disrupt security. Abedi states:

I did not know much about Baha'is before this time. Children in the alleys would sometimes chant, *Tu pir-e babi ridam* ("I shit on the Babi saint"), and my father

²⁴ Jafarian, *Jaryanha*, pp. 377.

²⁵ Fischer and Abedi, *Debating Muslims*, pp. 48-49.

²⁶ Jafarian, *Jaryanha*, pp. 373-4.

had told me that "Babis" (he did not distinguish Babis and Baha'is) did not say their prayers, and were *najes* (impure). In the village, the first *Sepah-e Danesh* (literacy corpsman) had been taunted and run out with accusations that he was Baha'i. [My father] had a small book by a mulla named Khalisi, called *Crime in Abarghu*, the story of a Baha'i who had killed some Muslims with an ax.²⁷ The book called on Muslims to rise up for justice. It inflamed people like my father and youths like myself to think of Baha'is as merciless killers... I remember that, after having read it, I had nightmares of a Baha'i trying to kill me with an ax. My father liked to tell me the stories of the year of Baha'i killing (*sal-e babi koshi*), as if he singlehandedly had killed Baha'is like so many flies or mosquitoes. The verb he used was *saqqat kardan*, the term for beating animals to death. Of course, I knew this was all vicarious bravado: he had never killed anyone in his life. [The teacher from the Hojjatiyeh's] approach was different. He did not share the pride of the earlier generations in having physically killed Baha'is. Instead he thought the spread of Baha'ism could be halted, bringing the misguided back to Islam, by training Muslim youths to challenge the Baha'i missionaries (*muballighs*).²⁸

As part of its (usually) non-violent approach, the Hojjatiyeh scrupulously avoided politics and instead favored opposition in the cultural (*farhangi*) realm, the gathering of intelligence, and the use of persuasion, coercion, and rhetoric to battle the spread of Baha'ism.²⁹ Its articles of association call for the propagation of Shi'ism and charitable works, but also for the promotion of a new, more systematic and scientific, vision of Islam. The Society was to publicize and distribute religious-scientific (*'elmi va dini*) materials, organize methodological religious conferences, and work with Islamic societies abroad. Almost every article of association contained the caveat that every action would be done with the approval of the authorities and in obedience to all relevant laws, since the most important principle of the Association was that it "will not meddle in political matters at all; this also applies to every kind of meddling, in a political context, from individuals connected to the Association."³⁰

²⁷ These murders (and the use of Baha'is as scapegoats) are discussed in Chapter III.

²⁸ Fischer and Abedi, *Debating Muslims*, pp. 48-49.

²⁹ Jafarian, *Jaryanha*, p. 372.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 373.

The main goal of the Hojjatiyeh was “to harass the Bahá’ís, while attempting to convert them to Shi’i Islam.”³¹ In this effort, it combined cult-like secrecy, the cellular organization of a terrorist network, and millenarian zeal (Halabi claimed to regularly communicate with the Hidden Imam).³² The Society was controlled by an inner core, about which little is known, which controlled a national network of independent cells. Sometimes there would be several cells in one city operating independent of each other.³³

No one from the higher levels has ever disclosed the group’s secrets, but according to former low-level members, their activities were primarily aimed at exerting strong, but basically non-violent, pressure on the Baha’is, aimed at causing lukewarm members to fall away and scaring away any potential converts. This occurred through the actions of the Islamic forces (*niruha*) that Halabi was able to gather under his personal leadership (the focus on personal loyalty to a millenarian leader was similar to rival groups, such as the Feda’iyan-e Islam and the Brotherhood Party). These forces were administered in each city by local administrative assemblies called *bayts* (*Bayt-e Imam-e Zaman* – the house of the Imam of the Age). Under each *bayt*’s supervision, the local troops were divided into three main groups: instruction (*tadris*), intelligence-gathering (*tahqiq*), and guidance (*ershad*). The first group moved the troops through three levels of education: beginning, intermediate, and advanced. The second group was for intelligence gathering, such as tracking former Muslims who had converted to Baha’ism after coming “under the sway (*taht-e ta’sir*) of the Bahais.” The third group used psychological operations and “their own special methods (*shivehha-ye khas-e*

³¹ Mansoor Moaddel, *Class, Politics, and Ideology in the Iranian Revolution* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) p. 250.

³² Fischer and Abedi, *Debating Muslims*, p.48.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

khod)” for “counseling” (*ershad*) prodigal Muslims until they returned to Islam.³⁴ There were also many smaller groups assigned to a variety of specialized tasks.

In many ways, the Hojjiyeh modeled itself after the Baha’is, in addition to drawing inspiration from the Left. The Baha’i administration order is centered on lay governing councils, known as *bayts* (referred to as “Spiritual Assemblies” at present) which are formed in each city, and this structure and term was emulated by Halabi. The Baha’is rejected a traditional preacher-audience arrangement in favor of lay leadership, as did the Hojjatis. Other similarities included: claims to a more scientific and rational approach to religion, the stated belief that religion should not become entangled in politics, recruitment among the educated middle class, a reputation for being very clean-cut and beardless, a division of tasks between committees and individuals assigned to protection and propagation work, an exaltation of the Imamate beyond what is typical, personal devotion to an unquestioned leader, semi-secrecy, restricting outsider’s access to some literature, using chairs and lecterns instead of rugs, and the imagery of members as “troops” engaged in a (non-violent) soteriological battle. The Islamic associations’ borrowing from the competition, although never acknowledged with regard to the Baha’is, has been admitted elsewhere. The editor of *Parcham-e Islam*, for example, has admitted, “I was fortunate enough to observe the ways in which Christian propagandists spread their religion. I closely studied their activities. Luckily, I learned the secrets of their resolve and perseverance.”³⁵

³⁴ Jafarian, *Jaryanha*, pp. 373-4.

³⁵ Tavakoli-Targhi, “Anti-Bahaism,” p. 212.

In their private meetings, Hojjatis would engage in hostile readings of Baha'i scripture and learn a "potted history of Bahaism"³⁶—so as to inoculate themselves against Baha'i proselytism—and have mock debates where one member would pretend to be a Baha'i and the other would practice his counter arguments against the religion.³⁷ A great amount of time was spend studying a Baha'i book known as the Book of Certitude (*Ketab-e Iqan*), which the Society's leader was obsessed with, wrote extensively against, and saw as a great threat to Shi'ism.³⁸ All of the Society's materials were secret and not to be shared or discussed with outsiders.³⁹

The Society would also have public meetings in the houses of members, which would feature talks by trained individuals from the public speaking team (*goruh-e sokhanrani*). These speakers were not clergy, but lay scholars who gave "scientific" presentations that did not involve a traditional cleric-audience dynamic. These meetings were largely derivative of the meetings held by Baha'is, and appealed to the same potential pool of converts. The Hojjati meetings differed in several ways, however, not the least of which was that they often featured the confessions and repentance of former Baha'is who had been re-educated into Islam.⁴⁰

The Society's activities included the publication of anti-Baha'i pamphlets, the disruption of Baha'i gatherings by gangs of toughs, and the general harassment of Baha'is and those interested in the Baha'i Faith. The Society was actively involved in violence against the Baha'is during the 1955 pogrom and in the years surrounding the 1979 Revolution, but violence was uncommon in the intervening period. This was in order to

³⁶Abdolqarim Soroush, "Jameah Interview with Dr. Soroush," accessed January 29, 2011, http://www.dr.soroush.com/English/Interviews/E-INT-19980600-Jameah_Interview_with_Dr_Soroush.htm

³⁷Fischer and Abedi, *Debating Muslims*, pp. 51-52.

³⁸Jafarian, *Jaryanha*, pp. 377-78.

³⁹Vali and Zubaida, "Factionalism," p. 149.

⁴⁰Jafarian, *Jaryanha*, pp. 373.

ensure that no disruption of order could be used by SAVAK as a reason for prohibiting their efforts. Their activities were designed to be almost unnoticed by the wider society and international observers.

Intelligence efforts were largely centered on surveillance and drawing up lists of those who were Baha'i.⁴¹ Infiltration efforts were carried out by "troops" of young men after they had first been carefully inoculated to withstand Baha'i propaganda. They would attend Baha'i gatherings and feign interest, or falsely convert to the Baha'i Faith, in order to gather information on the names and activities of Baha'is and pass this information on to their superiors. (SAVAK was also interested in the intelligence gathered by the Society, and was known to work with them on occasion).

This initiation in the field was designed to test and strengthen the "purity" of members' religious "chastity" by putting them in intimate association with the forbidden Other. This is somewhat reminiscent of the way in which Ghandi would actively test his chastity by lying in bed with naked women.⁴² In both cases, the maintenance of purity in the face of temptation was believed to create inner strength to be used in a nationalist project. Dr. Soroush relates that it was this insistence on field missions that ultimately led him to leave the Society:

I joined the Hojjatiyeh Society (which was called the anti-Bahai society then). I was taught a potted history of Bahaism... I attended Mr. Halabi's classes. All this took less than one year. Mr. Halabi's classes consisted of the exposition and criticism of the book *Iqan*, which is the Bahais' most important book. It was written by Mirza Hoseyn 'Ali, known as Baha'ollah. That's when I felt that this material was of no interest to me and that I could spend my time better studying the Koran and the *Nahj al-Bilaghah*, which is exactly what I did. So I left them and my bonds with them were severed to this very day. As I said, during my time there, they didn't teach us any of the laudable ideas you mentioned. Maybe that

⁴¹ Fischer, *Iran*, p. 187.

⁴² van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism*, pp. 97-98.

came later. I learnt a bit about the history of Baháism, the books *Iqan* and *Bayan*, and then I left, realizing that it wasn't my cup of tea. The reason I say it wasn't my cup of tea is because the anti-Bahá society didn't confine itself to educational activities. They demanded other things from people and from their members: turning up at Bahá gatherings, pretending to be enraptured by Baháism and mixing in their circles over a period of time under false pretences, following in their footsteps and occasionally beating people up or being beaten up or becoming embroiled in fierce arguments and counter-arguments. Not my sort of thing... I should add that the Hojjiyeh Society did not just oppose Baháism; it was not just concerned with negation, but with affirmation as well. It bred very pious individuals.⁴³

When recruits passed these initiations, they were sometimes transferred to other cells and promoted from undercover work to covert action to intimidate and harass potential converts, often through the use of psychological operations. Abedi relates an example of the manipulation and petty harassment that was involved in field operations:

I had a beard and a black suit, and he gave me a black attaché case. He took me to an alley in the Zoroastrian quarter, and told me to knock on a particular door and ask for Abbas. Abbas would not be there. I was to pretend I was an anti-Bahá'i activist from Tehran asked by Abbas to come and answer questions he was not capable of answering. Whether or not I was admitted into the house, I was to deliver the message that they should not think what they were doing was secret, but that we knew everything that went on. When I knocked, a [Baha'i woman] with a Zoroastrian accent answered without opening the door, "Who is it?" "Engineer Imami," I said. Members of SAVAK were said to use the titles Engineer or Doctor... [After the message was delivered and the Baha'i woman scared] I turned and walked away. Fattahi [A more senior Hojji] was waiting around the corner with his bicycle and took me on it back to his office. There I reported the conversation and asked him what it was all about. Abbas, he said, was a poor painter who had been seen repeatedly in the shop of this Zoroastrian-Baha'i tailor [to learn about the Baha'i Faith]. The ruse worked when Abbas next went to the house, he was turned away despite his protestation that he did not know any Engineer Imami. A few days later Fattahi sent someone else to Abbas to hire him to paint a house. As the contract was being made, this emissary asked, "You are not a Baha'i or a Jew are you; paint after all is a liquid and conveys impurity, we cannot use a *najes* painter." "No, no," Abbas assured him. Then later while painting, the emissary said, "Sorry I asked you, but you know these Baha'is are such hypocrites and liars." And with such preparation, often an Abbas would

⁴³ Soroush, "Interview."

spill his own story out of bitterness. So, Fattahi said, we turn potential enemies of the Mahdi into soldiers of the Mahdi.⁴⁴

Taheri claims that Halabi's ultimate goal was to create "a national register of Baha'is" so that everyone on the list could be pressured to convert to Islam or, failing that, "be put on a black list and boycotted by the Muslims" and perhaps eventually, in the cases of the most stubborn, "be put to death."⁴⁵ This is contradicted by reports that, after the Revolution, Halabi was upset by the widespread execution of Baha'is, claiming: "This is not the way, this is not our way."⁴⁶

The mission of the Hojjatiyeh was largely successful. As a result of the trauma of 1955 and ongoing "petty terror" from groups like the Hojjatiyeh, the Baha'i community in Iran became less bold and more inward-looking in the period between the pogrom and the Revolution, never again contemplating the massive campaign of growth and entry into the public sphere that was occurring before the 1955 pogrom. As some Baha'i communities experienced little or no net growth, the Hojjatiyeh grew rapidly and "disproportionately to the Bahai threat," which, "bred resentment among other Islamic organizations, that intended to mimic its success or to recruit from the same pool of talented religious youths."⁴⁷

The government permitted and tacitly encouraged the Hojjatiyeh, since it allowed anti-Baha'ism to be channeled into efforts that were non-violent and did not lead to disruptions of order that would generate American criticisms. There is clear documentary evidence showing that the Society operated with the approval and

⁴⁴ Fischer and Abedi, *Debating Muslims*, pp. 53-54.

⁴⁵ Taheri, *The Spirit of Allah*, pp. 113-114.

⁴⁶ Sadri, "Hojjatiya."

⁴⁷ Ibid.

occasional assistance of SAVAK.⁴⁸ This cooperation was based on the understanding that there would be no “provocation and disturbance.”⁴⁹

After the Revolution of 1979, the Society became a source of controversy because of its links to SAVAK, its rejection of political involvement, and the “infiltration” (*nofuz*) of its former members to the highest levels of power in the Islamic Republic. This perception of secret Hojjati control developed because the Society was able to attract, at least briefly, many of the most important characters who came to prominence in the Islamic Republic. Ayatollah Khomeini was a lifelong friend of Halabi.⁵⁰ Iran’s present Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei vigorously defended the Society and was said to have taken part in the Hojjatiyeh.⁵¹ Even liberals like Dr. Soroush were members of the Society in their youth. According to Dr. Soroush, the Society “recruited heavily” among his peers, and several of his schoolmates who later rose to great heights in the Islamic Republic (including five ministers) were also part of the Hojjatiyeh. He notes that even those who went on to join leftist groups often passed through this Society.⁵²

Even though the Society was disbanded shortly after the Revolution, rumors persist that it continues to operate. Recently, Ahmadinejad and his mentor have been tied to the Hojjatiyeh in a number of media reports.⁵³ There is presently not enough reliable information to accurately assess the role of the Hojjatiyeh after 1979. It is interesting,

⁴⁸ Jafarian, *Jaryanha*, pp. 374-75.

⁴⁹ Cooper, *The Bahá'ís of Iran*, p. 11.

⁵⁰ Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown*, p. 157.

⁵¹ Vali and Zubaida, “Factionalism,” p. 155.

⁵² Soroush, “Interview.”

⁵³ See, for example, Bill Samii, “Iran Report: September 13, 2004,” *Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty*, accessed 20 January 2011, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1342699.html>; “Does Hojjatieh Sect Secretly Control Iran?” *Iran Dispatch*, accessed 20 January 2011, <http://irandispatch.com/2010/07/28/161/>; Muhammad Sahimi, “Hojjatiyeh, Mesbahiyeh, and Ahmadinejad,” *Tehran Bureau*, 29 Sep 2010, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/tehranbureau/2010/09/hojjatiyeh-mesbahiyeh-and-ahmadinejad.html>; and Ardalan Sayami, “Hojatieh Society: 57 Years in the Shadow,” *Payvand Iran News*, 30 October 2010, <http://www.payvand.com/news/10/oct/1243.html>.

however, that the Society spent so many years attacking the supposed infiltration of Baha'is and denouncing them as tools of imperialism, only to themselves be attacked after the Revolution for having secretly infiltrated the government and for having been the tools of imperialism (via SAVAK).

“Dying on the vine”: positivism and the myth of clerical decline

Governmental and diplomatic sources for the late 1950s and early 1960s portray Shi'ism as “dying on the vine” and “falling rapidly” as a relevant or effective force in Iran. This decline was generally blamed on the “cowering” of the ulama discussed in the last chapter, urbanization, and the younger generation’s lack of interest in traditional Shi’ism. It was felt that this process was likely to continue since, after the anti-Baha’i campaign, the government had largely exorcised the conservative voice from public space and crucial media outlets such as the radio. Falsafi was replaced on state radio by a liberal, pro-regime preacher and, although Ayatollah Behbahani railed against this man as “no more than a pantheist,” such criticisms were claimed to have little effect without a national platform. The ulama only had access to public space in government-approved ways and, in the American assessment, could not stand up to the hegemonic force of popular media, which was touted as a “potent weapon” against them.⁵⁴ This was considered especially true in the cities, where the ulama lacked the direct contact with the people that they enjoyed in rural areas. Since the clergy lacked access to the urban population through the media, secularization was seen as a concomitant of urbanization. It was observed that while only 5% of urban Muslims paid religious taxes, 60% of rural Muslims did so.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 24: 438.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, Reel 2: 147

American diplomats saw the modernizing trend in Iran as inevitable and thought that this meant the end of the ulama. This impression was supported by anecdotal evidence from the capital, where “the great majority of fairly well-educated Tehranis, excluding the Baha’is, is agnostic or even atheist.”⁵⁶ Members of the educated upper class were also observed to “hold no strong religious convictions at all, even though some of them may be obliged by their positions to play lip service to religion” and “have not consciously renounced their nominal faith.”⁵⁷ But, for the new generation, “Islam has ceased to have any real meaning,” although “nothing of value palatable to these Iranians is available to replace it.”⁵⁸ Religion was felt to be falling fast and only important for “third class people.”⁵⁹

The root of the problem was identified as the ulama’s inability to adapt to changing circumstances. This was not unique to Iran but part of “the classic conflict between reaction and progress.”⁶⁰ In Iran, the ulama were “regarded by the educated elite as benighted or at least hopelessly behind the times.”⁶¹ An analysis of Iran’s officer class, for example, judged that the ulama “have been singularly unsuccessful in their feeble and sporadic efforts to restate Shia Islam in terms which will enable it to come to grips with Western techniques and ideology.”⁶² A 1957 British report compares the “grafting,” “obscurantist,” and “nefarious influence” of these “creatures” to the “Pharisees” at the time of Jesus, the outdated face of a previous era.⁶³

⁵⁶ Ibid., Reel 24: 439.

⁵⁷ USDS, *Iran, 1960-1962*, Reel 13: 663.

⁵⁸ Ibid., *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 2: 144.

⁵⁹ NACPM, RG 59 / 150 / 69 / 30 / 07 / Box 4, Pol 13-6 Religious Groups, Memorandum of Conversation, November 12, 1964.

⁶⁰ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 149804 / EP 1461 / 9, Tehran to FO, March 15, 1960.

⁶¹ USDS, *Iran, 1960-1962*, Reel 1: 812.

⁶² Ibid., *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 8: 738.

⁶³ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 127075 / EP1015 / 30, Notes on Meshed, June 1957,” June 27, 1957.

In 1965, when some accused American policies in Iran of producing “fanatics,” the response was that terrorism was just the act of dead-enders who were “lashing-out against the 20th century—inevitably a secularist 20th century which the American presence in Iran may epitomize.”⁶⁴ American reports note that even though some clerics may be progressive, they too must be opposed since the ulama “must not be allowed to stand in the way of the twentieth century... the ‘clergy’ as an institution are inherently enemies of the twentieth century.”⁶⁵ For, as “most educated people are aware,” the “fanatical, conservative and reactionary attitudes generally held by the clergy are a drag on progress.”⁶⁶ Iran was thus considered handicapped because it had spent so long “wedded to a religion in which the clergy for the most part reject the necessity for any adaptation to the requirements of a modern world.”⁶⁷ This “refusing to adapt” included the insistence on retaining “discredited religious laws” and “quasi-superstitious traditions.”⁶⁸

This idea that Iran was inevitably moving towards secularism, and that the clergy were incompatible with modernity, is the result of the wholesale acceptance of Modernization theory, which involves a Comtean understanding of the “progress” from religion to science. In this linear and unidirectional perspective, the ulama were seen as soon to be vestigial class, doomed by their inability to evolve. These ideas were not only misguided, but they blinded their proponents to the ways in which Shi’ism was actively

⁶⁴ NACPM, RG 59 / 150 / 69 / 30 / 07 / Box 11, Pol 23-8, Howison to Holmes, January 29, 1965.

⁶⁵ Ibid., Pol 13-6, Religious Groups, Howison to Herz, March 5, 1965.

⁶⁶ Ibid., *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 3: 373.

⁶⁷ There were occasions when exceptions were discussed. In one such occasion it was noted that “the picture is not entirely black” since “in Isfahan a small handful of mollahs realize the necessity for coming to terms with the twentieth century. Some of these men may have the patience and wisdom and tact needed to adapt the moral codes of Islam sufficiently to re-create a sense of values for the thinking Iranian” (Ibid., Reel 2: 144).

⁶⁸ Ibid.

adapting to the new environment and to its creation of national networks and systems of mobilization and information distribution, despite being denied an unscripted voice in the public sphere. This process relied heavily on youth-driven Islamic associations and secret societies, which provided networks for information distribution and organizations capable of distributing the leaflets and handbills generated by a clandestine Islamic press.

Alam's "White Revolution"

In the late 1950s, the Shah continued to increase his direct control of Iran. It was observed that the government was "dominated by the ascendancy of the Shah, not merely over his ministers, but over every organ of government" and that "the pattern of his personal rule is steadily becoming clearer." Such that, "he alone determines policy; all the strings of control are firmly in his hands."⁶⁹ The Shah's inconsistency was still a running concern, however, and it was felt that he was establishing an "intermittent and hesitant dictatorship."⁷⁰

One of the main issues moderating his ambitions was the lack of dynastic stability, since he had been unable to produce an heir with Soraya. This pressure to conceive, in conjunction with a variety of other issues, caused the couple to divorce in 1958. The Shah took the loss hard. After losing Soraya, he was described as "a man in a sensitive, delicate mood, a lonely man with scarcely one really intimate friend, and few relaxations, plunging himself still more deeply into his work."⁷¹

At this time, in reaction to the fall of the Iraqi monarchy in 1958, Asadollah Alam came up with the idea of preventing a popular revolution in Iran by preemptively staging

⁶⁹ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 133001/ EP 1011 / 1, Stevens, annual report for 1957.

⁷⁰ Ibid., FO 371 / 127071 / EP 1011 / 1, "Annual Political Review for 1956," January 18, 1957.

⁷¹ Ibid., FO 371 / 133019, Russel to FO, May 13, 1958.

a revolution from above to address the needs of the lower classes. This idea, which grew into the “White Revolution” of 1963, is later attributed to the Shah or the Americans, but 1958 documents clearly identify this plan as “Asadollah Alam’s theory of the White Revolution.”⁷² Alam’s “brainchild” included land redistribution, the enfranchisement of women, and other elements that were eventually included in the 1963 referendum on the White Revolution.

Although Alam was persistently “working upon His Majesty’s mind to this end,” the Shah was hesitant.⁷³ He felt that drastic reforms were not needed, since the Iranian people could not really be unhappy, as the economy was improving. Any dissatisfaction, he believed, must be the result of Soviet intrigues. When the Shah was told that this was not the case, “he could not understand it” and felt that “people really had nothing to complain of.”⁷⁴ As one regime supporter put it on a different occasion, “Just because people are complaining, you must not think that the regime is unpopular. Iranians always complain; they would be unhappy if they were not complaining.”⁷⁵

The outgoing British Ambassador, Roger Stevens, was pessimistic about the Shah’s ability to successfully follow through on any kind of reform. In Stevens’s assessment, the Shah is “incapable of formulating, let alone executing, a really constructive policy of any kind... As long as he is on the throne of Persia it is hard to imagine that there will be a decent Government, let alone social justice.” He did not believe that this situation was likely to change, since the Shah “is psychologically incapable of surrendering power or presiding over a genuine popularly based

⁷² Ibid., FO 371 / 133006 / EP 1015 / 37, Stevens to FO, August 20, 1958.

⁷³ Ibid., FO 371 / 133006 / EP 1015 / 34, Stevens to FO, August 11, 1958.

⁷⁴ Ibid., FO 371 / 133006 / EP 1015 / 37, Stevens to FO, August 20, 1958.

⁷⁵ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 4: 69.

Government.”⁷⁶ The American National Security Council was similarly pessimistic about the likelihood of genuine reforms, observing that the Shah “was the type of individual who started off a course of action very boldly but usually did not stick to it. Accordingly, we should be aware that in our present policy we are probably living on borrowed time and that ultimately there will be a shake-up in Iran.”⁷⁷ In another meeting, it was said that the United States was “dealing with an individual (the shah) of very uncertain quality” and that although there was some “friendly urging” to break with the landlord class, no pressure was applied since the Shah “was so exceedingly temperamental that the State department feared that if we really attempted to put the heat on him, he might very well tell us to go to hell and proceed to play ball with the other side.”⁷⁸

Although his advisors pushed social reform, the Shah was primarily interested in growing the military to face an external threat. In 1959, Iran’s national police chief lamented the Shah’s neglect of domestic security. He claimed that this obsession with the military was because “He likes to believe that all his subjects love him and that his only enemies are foreigners.” Mocking the Shah’s priorities, he said that it was “as if a man were to set up a machine gun in his front door and leave the back door unlocked and unguarded.” He noted that if an emergency should arise, he could arm at most a third of his forces, since the military had all the weapons and would likely have to be deployed domestically in the case of revolts.

⁷⁶ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 133006 / EP 1015 / 38, Stevens to FO, August 21, 1958.

⁷⁷ DDEPL, Papers of Dwight D. Eisenhower as President, 1953-61, NSC series, Box 10, 379th meeting of the NSC, September 18, 1958.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 386th meeting of the NSC, November 13, 1958.

For some reasons that I can't understand, he becomes more narrowly interested in the Army every year. He can't see that an efficient, high-morale, properly equipped police force is more valuable to him than divisions and air squadrons. If they try to send the Army into the bazaar to stop a fanatic mob this coming Moharam, it will be a tragedy, and it will seriously shake the regime.⁷⁹

The specter of revolt by a “fanatical mob at Moharram” had been anticipated since the fear of a “holocaust” of Iranian Baha'is in Moharram 1955. In 1959, such a revolt was again feared because of the conflict with Borujerdi over the government's discussion of women's enfranchisement and proposals for limited land reform.

Borujerdi's last stand

The question of women's rights came to the forefront when former Prime Minister Matin-Daftari created an uproar by publicly asking the Cabinet what it intended to do to bring the status of women in line with Article VIII of Iran's constitution (which could be interpreted as allowing both genders the right to vote) and with the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*. In connection with this demand by Matin-Daftari, there was some vague talk of women voting in the next majles elections.

The enfranchisement of women was said to be supported by the educated middle class, army officers, Mosaddeq supporters, the Baha'is, and other minorities, but opposed by most other groups. One of the groups most actively involved in supporting the emancipation of women was the followers of assassinated intellectual Ahmad Kasravi, who was also the founder of a nebulous “world religion” movement “vaguely resembling Bahatism.” This organization believed in the “complete emancipation of women” and its

⁷⁹ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 4: 99.

members “have become more noisy and courageous since the mullahs suffered their rebuff at the hands of the Shah in 1955 following the anti-Bahai campaign.”⁸⁰

In response to the debate over women’s enfranchisement, Borujerdi claimed that the constitution of Iran required that its laws not contradict Islam, and the Grand Ayatollah considered Matin-Daftari’s appeal to be contrary to Islam, “which has never recognized equal rights for women.” Under his leadership, the ulama “which has been nursing its wrath ever since the Shah hoodwinked it and smothered the anti-Bahai campaign of 1955,” allowed this anger to “burst out in great indignation.” Sermons all over Iran denounced this call for female equality until the Cabinet “took fright” and dropped the issue. Instead, Prime Minister Eqbal was sent to Qom to explain that Matin-Daftari was speaking on his own and that the government had no plans relating to the status of women.⁸¹

Although he never called for reform himself, it was generally believed that the Shah had been defeated by Borujerdi’s efforts because of his “lack of backbone.”⁸² In a January 1959 conversation with former Prime Minister Tabataba’i, for example, Tabataba’i refers to the Shah’s “surrender” to Borujerdi over the issue of women’s rights as “shameful,” feeling that “Borujerdi is consistent, at least.”⁸³ In reality, diplomatic sources confirm that the Shah had no interest in improving the status of women and that Matin-Daftari acted alone in “rousing a slumbering dog.”⁸⁴ Rather than seeking confrontation through controversial issues, the Shah was actually trying to cultivate good relations with the clergy at this time, to use them as ideological weapons if Iraq were to

⁸⁰ Ibid., 24-27.

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Ibid., 73-74.

⁸³ Ibid., 38.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 26.

be used against him by Moscow or Cairo. Borujerdi “is aware of this, and accordingly feels more secure in the knowledge of his value to the regime.” This new security gave the ulama the confidence to again enter the political arena. A number of younger clerics were not opposed to women voting, but loyally backed the opinion of Borujerdi and “kept quiet as mice” for the sake of clerical unity. Even though he remained blacklisted, Falsafi also joined the resistance by, for example, taking to the pulpit (during a large funeral) to attack women’s rights as a “foreign teaching” contrary to Islam.⁸⁵

Alam believed that social reform provided a far more effective national defense than utilizing the clergy and he opposed the Shah’s willingness to lose face over the women question. In his opinion:

One must step a fine line between buckling to the mullahs in Iran and needlessly angering them. I admit that we mishandled the 1955 anti-Bahai campaign, but I can say that I myself tried to persuade the Cabinet to silence Falsafi 6 days before they actually voted to do so. I think that these 6 days might have been decisive. Also, there was insufficient contact between Borujerdi and the government and too many government officials allowed themselves to be browbeaten. I myself will not get into a feud with the mullahs over something relatively minor (such as women’s rights), but I would never do as [Prime Minister] Eqbal did two weeks ago and go begging to Borujerdi at the Shah’s command. The Shah has asked me to see Borujerdi several times, but I have managed not to do it.⁸⁶

Land reform was introduced later in 1959, causing Borujerdi to become convinced that the Shah intended to eviscerate Islam in Iran. The Shi’ite clergy were independent from the state largely as a result of the income that they received from endowment land and donations from the landlord class. Land reform threatened to remove crucial revenue streams and in so doing threatened the independence of the

⁸⁵ Ibid., 27

⁸⁶ Ibid., 70.

ulama.⁸⁷ To combat this policy, Borujerdi issued a *fatwa* that denounced land reform and claimed that it was against Islamic law.

The Shah responded with the argument that other Muslim nations (Iraq and Pakistan) had carried out land reform, that it only impacted a few landlords, and that it was needed to fight Communism. Borujerdi replied that Iraq and Pakistan were republics but Iran was a constitutional monarchy and that it was the Shah's job to follow the constitutional mandate to protect Shi'ite Islam. The legitimacy of the Shah's rule was not a settled matter, but rested on this point and "the enactment of a godless measure such as the present bill would shake the foundations of the Throne."⁸⁸ Borujerdi's implicit threat to unseat the Shah was not relayed, since his representative "has not found the courage to make these points to the Shah." When his (undelivered) threat was not responded to, Borujerdi sent copies of his *fatwa* denouncing land reform to members of the majles and distributed it nationally through the clerical network, forcing a confrontation with the Shah in which "unhappily boats are burnt on both sides."⁸⁹ By widely distributing his *fatwa*, Borujerdi forced the issue, since it could not be taken back, and his opposition could no longer be kept secret by a press blackout or other means.

Ayatollah Behbahani informed the speaker of the majles that it was shocking that land reform was even being discussed, and warned that if it became law against Borujerdi's wishes, it would be illegal, as the united opinion of the ulama overrides the decisions of the majles (according to the never-enforced supplement to Iran's

⁸⁷ For land reform in Iran, see Afsaneh Najmabadi, *Land Reform and Social Change in Iran* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1998); Ann Lambton, *The Persian Land Reform, 1962-1966* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969); Ali Ansari, "The Myth of the White Revolution: Mohammad Reza Shah, "Modernization" and the Consolidation of Power," *Middle Eastern Studies* 37:3 (2001): pp. 1-24.

⁸⁸ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 149804 / EP 1461 / 5, Tehran to FO, March 1, 1960.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

constitution).⁹⁰ The Shah warned Borujerdi that if he did not stop his “black” reactionary ways, he would have to carry out a “white coup d’état,” in which he would dissolve parliament and “shear the clergy of their remaining privileges.”⁹¹ Borujerdi cautioned that if the government went ahead with land reform it “could spark a broad general uprising.”⁹² All the while, “The Government was careful to allow no word of the more serious clerical opposition to be reported in the press.”⁹³ General Ahmadi found the whole episode regretful, but claimed that since Borujerdi had forced the issue, the army was ready to meet any opposition. As the confrontation mounted, the clergy again formed a united front behind Borujerdi. As a result of the collective clerical “furor,” the bill was diluted to the point that it accomplished nothing.⁹⁴

Although this episode was a major political victory for Borujerdi, immediately following the earlier victory over the issue of women’s enfranchisement, Borujerdi has nevertheless been cast in later historiography as being “almost totally inactive in political matters.”⁹⁵ In reality, Borujerdi made at least three major political interventions. He died before the White Revolution proper was introduced, but there is no doubt that he would have opposed it even more intensely than he opposed the reforms of 1959. When he rallied the clergy in 1962 and 1963, Khomeini was not originating a movement, but rather maintaining the clerical opposition by building upon the *fatwas* and mobilization employed by Borujerdi in his final years.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.; FO 371 / 149804 / EP 1461 / 7 / G, Tehran to FO, March 8, 1960..

⁹² CIA, *Central Intelligence Bulletin*, March 11, 1960.

⁹³ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 149804 / EP 1461 / 9, Tehran to FO, March 15, 1960.

⁹⁴ USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 4: 846.

⁹⁵ Hamid Algar, trans., *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini* (Berkeley: Mizan Press, 1981), p. 15.

An heir, at last

Following the setbacks of 1959, the Shah ended the year by marrying again, ever concerned by the need to secure the dynasty by producing a male heir. The new queen, Farah, became pregnant early in 1960, which caused the Shah to grow more confident. After a son was born in October 1960, the Shah recommitted himself to securing the dynasty. Whereas clerical opposition was allowed in 1959, by the end of 1960 there was “little evidence that religious speakers are at present able to preach freely along lines not approved by the regime...In general religious leaders are not able today to criticize the regime or its policies openly.”⁹⁶ Despite the illusion of calm, there was widespread political and economic dissatisfaction, such that “a small outburst from any source could be contagious even in the absence of a specific issue.”⁹⁷

When challenged about his increasing autocratic rule in this period, the Shah defended himself by claiming that successor regimes would be just as autocratic, as the only alternative to him was a dictatorship of the Right or a dictatorship of the Left.⁹⁸ In 1961, he warned that he must rule as an autocrat because most of the world’s oil was either in Iran or within 500 miles of her borders. If Iran fell, the entire region’s oil wealth would fall into Soviet hands. In order to stop the appeal of Communism, he maintained, he needed to conduct social reform, and he would be hindered in creating significant reform if he had to deal with an independent majles. So, in his opinion, the only choice was to rule without a parliament, or to give token elections in the “form to which the Iranian people were accustomed (i.e. rigged).”⁹⁹ He made similar arguments the

⁹⁶ USDS, *Iran, 1960-1962*, Reel 13: 664.

⁹⁷ NACPM, CIA, “Short Term Prospects for Iran,” memorandum for the director, June 3, 1960.

⁹⁸ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 157616 / EP 1023 / 2, Memo of conversation, November 20, 1962.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, FO 371 / 157612, Tehran to FO, October 29, 1961.

following year, rejecting free elections based on the (unintentionally hilarious) observation that “if the elections were uncontrolled, no one could tell what the result would be.”¹⁰⁰

Despite his new projection of confidence, the Shah occasionally fell back into his characteristic malaise. A confidential American report expressed concern about the Shah’s “defeatist talk about his job” and his suggestion that “if he sensed that Iran was fed up with him, he would simply clear out.” He confided that he was friendless and alone and admitted to bouts of depression. He claimed that “sometimes the job seemed absolutely overwhelming.” The author of the report, after spending some time with the Shah, came to a realization about him.

All of a sudden, I realized the kind of man with whom I was talking. He is a modern Hamlet, a Hamlet in a remote part of the world, a man with all the right instincts, intelligent, capable of understanding what the game is but with a fundamental, temperamental reluctance to play the game to the fullest. Unfortunately, this trait, this temperamental quirk or defect communicates itself down to the people, through an elite layer of administrators who take advantage of this soft and sad side.¹⁰¹

“The dust of mourning settles on the Iranian nation”

Grand Ayatollah Borujerdi died in Qom on March 30, 1961. There was a three day period of national mourning and the government made a great show of respect although this was said to be insincere and merely “the regime’s attention to the forms.”¹⁰²

Government offices and the bazaars were closed, radio and television suspended, mosques and public buildings covered in black, and special editions of newspapers

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., FO 371 / 164188 / EP 1023 / 2, Memo of conversation, November 20, 1962.

¹⁰¹ PKOF, 1961-1963, Reel 12: 354.

¹⁰² USDS, *Iran, 1960-1962*, Ibid., Reel 1: 812.

released with black borders.¹⁰³ The Isfahan consulate reported that the city was in shock at the loss, despite Borujerdi's age (eighty-six), and that the streets were full of mourners as the sounds of weeping echoed throughout the city. On March 31 and April 1, processions of flagellants in black moved through the city, beating themselves in time while wailing. Among the mourning chants, it was claimed that "the ship of Islam is again storm tossed, the dust of mourning settles on the Iranian nation."¹⁰⁴ When the weather worsened, it was said that "the sky was weeping for the late Ayatollah Borujerdi."¹⁰⁵

It was sometimes the case that a universal *marja'* would indicate his preferred successor before he died, but Borujerdi did not do this. Before his death, he divided some of the administrative and financial aspects of leadership between four of his junior associates. Ayatollah Shariatmadari and Ayatollah Golpayegani were assigned the most prominent tasks, and Khomeini—who was primarily known as an educator at the time—was charged with the supervision and support of the theological students. Despite this confidence, Khomeini was not in the running to succeed Borujerdi. The primary contest was, first of all, over whether the new leader would be from Iran or Iraq, and, secondarily, over who was the leading *marja'* within Iran. As the struggle to succeed Borujerdi began, several camps emerged, based in Mashhad, Tehran, and Qom. It was observed that, because of the "feuding and back-biting among the senior clergy," a simple transition was "a virtual impossibility."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ FO 371 / 157656, EP 1781 / 1, "Death of the World Leader of the Moslem Shi'ite Sect," April 7, 1961.

¹⁰⁴ USDS, *Iran, 1960-1962*, Reel 13: 670-73.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, Reel 4: 153.

¹⁰⁶ NACPM, Subject-numeric 1964-66 / Box 3225, Soc 12 Religion, "the Iranian Shia Moslem Clergy," June 17, 1964.

In an April 1961 report, Ayatollah Hakim in Iraq was considered the frontrunner, while Ayatollah Shariatmadari in Iran was also considered a strong contender, although the fact that Borujerdi failed to name him—despite extensive association with him—worked to his disadvantage. By the end of April, diplomatic reports identified grassroots pressure for the next leader to be based in Iran, because of a desire to maintain the status of Qom, “national prejudice” against losing out to Iraq, and a desire to keep religious taxes within Iran rather than having to send money to a leader based in Iraq (Borujerdi received over half a million pounds a year in religious taxes).¹⁰⁷ The regime’s position was initially unclear, with some reports indicating that the Shah had instructed SAVAK to do “everything possible” to make sure the position remains in Iran, while other reports indicated that the Shah wanted the new leader to be based in Iraq, since having the Shi’ite leadership in Iran had inhibited his ability to reform.¹⁰⁸

With Borujerdi gone, and a new Prime Minister (Amini), the Shah decided to ease restrictions on the clergy, since he did not feel threatened. He ordered less strict discipline in the 1961 Moharram observances. A July 1961 report on Moharram in Mashhad relates that there were no SAVAK-scripted sermons and the government tried to win goodwill by providing services for mourners, such as distributing water. There were less security forces present, with more police than soldiers, and they “were cooperative rather than repressive.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁷ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 157656, EP 1781 / 2, “Death of Ayatullah Burujerdi, Leader of the Shi’a Sect” April 6, 1961.

¹⁰⁸ USDS, *Iran, 1960-1962*, Reel 1: 887.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, Reel 2: 118.

1962

In October 1962, clerical opposition arose in relation to a new law regarding local government councils, which did not explicitly restrict voting or membership to men. The possibility of women's enfranchisement initially generated clerical opposition, but closer inspection of the law revealed that oaths could be sworn on a "holy book" and not on the Qur'an specifically. This was already the case in the majles, where representatives of the recognized minorities were allowed to be sworn in on their own holy books.

Nevertheless, the lack of specificity regarding religious identity and the use of a "holy book" instead of the Qur'an were interpreted as evidence that the real purpose of the law was to allow Baha'is to take over local governments across Iran.

Khomeini believed that the local election law was for "the delivery of Iran to the Baha'is," who were marked as the representative of Zionism and the West.¹¹⁰ An American report notes that this anti-Baha'i turn was unsurprising, since, for the ulama, the Baha'is are "the perennial scapegoats when things are not going their way."¹¹¹ The Baha'is were seen as not only an existential threat to Islam, but also as a cause for mass opposition to the regime, if it did not reverse itself, since "this danger to our religion is intolerable."¹¹² This opposition was the first major political intervention by Khomeini, and his first public criticism of the government, and it was over the threat of Baha'ism.

Clerical opposition to this measure largely blamed Alam, who became Prime Minister in 1962 and was still hated for his role in ending the anti-Baha'i pogrom and lying about Baha'i dismissals, as well as for his anti-clerical disposition and desire to push through reforms that were considered anti-Islamic. A close associate of Khomeini

¹¹⁰ Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown*, p. 85.

¹¹¹ NACPM, RG 59 / 250 / 63 / 18 / 6 / Box 7, "Opposition Movements 1962," November 29, 1962.

¹¹² Khomeini, *Kauthar*, p. 13 [November 23, 1962].

claimed that his opposition to the government did not begin until the Alam premiership, when they believed “that ‘Bahai and Jewish influence’ in the Court was getting too strong.”¹¹³ Behbehani blamed Prime Minister Alam for refusing to negotiate with the ulama over the “holy book” issue, and claimed that any “grave consequences” that may result rested on him personally. Khomeini attacked Alam’s policies as “totally inconsistent with Islam” and appealed to the Shah, on behalf of the “Muslim nation,” to remove all anti-Islamic reforms. These messages were widely distributed and protests were held in Qom.¹¹⁴

The two most vocal critics of the local election law were Behbehani and Khomeini, who were working together. According to a CIA study, Ayatollah Behbehani wanted to succeed Borujerdi but had “no chance” because of his tainted reputation. To get around this, he settled on promoting a symbolic leader that would allow him to be the power behind the scenes. At first he considered working through one of the ayatollahs in Iraq, but by 1962 decided to back Khomeini, whom he “apparently considered to be weak and pliable.” To support Khomeini as a symbolic leader, Behbehani “began to activate his organization in support of Khomeini, and many in the religious community swung to the Behbehani-Khomeini coalition.”¹¹⁵ By taking the lead in opposing the local election law, and elevating the issue by giving it a Baha’i spin, Behbehani was able to increase Khomeini’s prominence, since the frontrunners to succeed Borujerdi were forced, by pressure from below, to join in the agitation, causing them to take a secondary role to this junior cleric.

¹¹³ NACPM, Subject-numeric 1964-66 / Box 3225, Soc 12 Religion, “the Iranian Shia Moslem Clergy,” June 17, 1964.

¹¹⁴ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 164186, EP 1015 / 128, Tehran to FO, November 9, 1962.

¹¹⁵ The key element of this plan was winning over the Tehran bazaar, which Behbehani was able to deliver as a result of anger at the economic conditions in Iran. This plan did not go as expected, as Behbahani died of cancer in 1963 and Khomeini inherited his political “machine” (NFAC (CIA), “Islam in Iran,” p. 15).

With Behbahani's support, Khomeini framed this minor issue of definitions related to local government as a battle for the survival of Islam itself, actively challenging the ulama to stand up for their religion. He warned:

We are talking about Islam being in danger. The ulama of Islam cannot remain silent... If the day should come when, with your help, we decide to take action against the government, then the number of the people who will be actively involved will far outnumber those gathered here. On that day, the crowd of people will be so huge that it will have to gather outside the city of Qum, for there will be insufficient space here. But having said that, we expect the government to bear the possible consequences of their actions in mind and not to delay any further in reaching a decision.¹¹⁶

Protests arose initially in Tehran and Qom, but by late October Mashhadi clerics were being pressured from below to join the opposition. In early November, for example, the four main ayatollahs in Mashhad (Khorasani, Sabzevari, Milani, and Qomi) "were repeatedly approached by theological students, mullahs, preachers and members of religious societies to make known their views on this subject and to stimulate effective protests to the Government." As a result of this pressure from below, Ayatollah Khorasani wrote Tehran on behalf of the Mashhad clergy, objecting to the local election law. In his reply, Prime Minister Alam clarified that only Muslims and the recognized minorities would be allowed to serve, but that this was "a matter of civil rather than religious concern."

As agitation continued, Ayatollah Milani (a faithful supporter of the Shah) felt compelled to act in response to pressure from below, and sent a telegram of protest in his own name. Ayatollah Milani was "somewhat liberal minded" and did not care about the law himself, but "appears to have been under considerable pressure from his followers

¹¹⁶ Khomeini, *Kauthar*, p. 8 [November 11, 1962].

and the influence of his coequals.” Major protests were scheduled for November 29 and this “caused some anxiety to the Government” especially since “it had become clear that Ayatollah Milani had been forced onto the stage.”¹¹⁷ Seeking to avoid a confrontation with a clerical asset, it was announced on November 27 that the law would be amended, and telegrams were sent to leading clerics in Mashhad on November 29, which resulted in the cancelation of plans for further protests.¹¹⁸

After the issue had been resolved, Khomeini compared the resistance against the Baha’i entry into provincial councils to Ali’s fight against Mu’awiya, Shirazi’s opposition during the Tobacco Protest (1890-92), and the opposition of Iraqi ulama to British colonial rule. In each case “revolt was a divine duty” because “a cruel government was coming to power,” which threatened Islam. He claimed that quietism was the norm and that “Whenever one of the Imams saw that revolt was not appropriate, he stayed at home and propagated Islam instead. This was the way from the beginning of Islam.” But, when the government threatened Islam itself, revolt was required, even if forces were few and defeat assured.¹¹⁹

The government engaged in a “triumphant retreat,” as one paper called it, and reform efforts were postponed until the following year, since Alam did not want the main goal of land reform to be derailed by peripheral issues like procedural matters for district councils. Behind the scenes, the Shah was “even more vehement in his criticism of the Clergy than Alam had been” and felt that “the Mullahs were desperately trying to maintain a position of power in the country which he would not permit.”¹²⁰ A November

¹¹⁷ USDS, *Iran, 1960-1962*, Reel 2: 990-92.

¹¹⁸ *Ettela’at*, 6 Azar 1341 [November 27, 1962]; *Khorasan*, 9 Azar 1341 [November 30, 1962].

¹¹⁹ Khomeini, *Kauthar*, p. 26 [December 2, 1962].

¹²⁰ USDS, *Iran, 1960-1962*, Reel 4: 905.

1962 report notes that the government “plans to quiet the mullas” through a crackdown and threats to redistribute endowment land if they did not fall in line.¹²¹

1963

In January 1963, the Shah introduced the “White Revolution.” This ambitious series of reforms would eventually include nineteen elements, but only six points were initially discussed: land reform, the enfranchisement of women, the privatization of government-owned businesses, profit sharing, the formation of a literacy corps, and the nationalization of forests. These six points were voted on in a national referendum on January 26, 1963.

Land reform was the main feature of the Shah’s “revolution from above,”¹²² which was designed to pre-empt and co-opt a peasant revolution (although it largely ignored the danger of the exploding population of urban poor). The Shah’s acceptance of Alam’s brainchild “took form slowly in his mind, and initially it lacked direction.” He was finally motivated to take specific action because of the Kennedy administration’s pressure for reform, nervousness about opposition from the Right and the Left, and “the unusual display of affection and loyalty he received from the peasantry” in areas where small-scale land reform had occurred.¹²³

The Shah wanted changes that were radical enough to distract from the lack of political reform, but “conservative enough to avoid extensive disruption and a truly revolutionary situation.”¹²⁴ As a result, the White Revolution’s main feature is “its lack

¹²¹ NACPM, RG 59 / 250 / 63 / 18 / 6 . Box 7, “Opposition Movements 1962,” November 29, 1962.

¹²² Ibid., CIA: OCI, “Land Reform and Tribal Dissidence in Iran,” May 17, 1963.

¹²³ USDS, *Iran, 1960-1962*, Reel 3: 15.

¹²⁴ NACPM, CIA: OCI, “Iran’s ‘White Revolution,’” June 10, 1966.

of any attempt or even thought of political reforms.”¹²⁵ As the Shah explained in an interview, “my job is to prepare my country for democracy, but we cannot yet have democracy—American or British style. It is not time... our people are not ready for that. Our people need the king.”¹²⁶

The main opponents of land reform were landlords as well as the ulama, “who are watching their former positions of power and prestige crumble around them.”¹²⁷ The clergy opposed land reform because it would reduce their income by taking land away from their biggest financial supporters, and would also involve the direct loss of income if they were no longer able to hold large areas as tax-free religious endowments (15% of arable land in Iran was held by the ulama as endowments).¹²⁸ They urged a “no” vote or a boycott, but there was little organized protest. Clerics and landlords were unsure of how to respond and were internally divided, a problem that was made worse by the regime’s policy of using bribes and threats to keep the opposition under control. The major problem was that “thus far no one leader has been allowed to emerge who could symbolize opposition to the Shah as Mosaddeq did in 1951-53.”¹²⁹

The clerical leadership also rejected the enfranchisement of women called for by the White Revolution, and this issue was a major source of controversy, although it was overshadowed by the economic threat of land reform. Both points, taken together, were seen as proof of the regime’s underlying desire to wage war on Islam itself. The Shah responded to these criticisms by calling the ulama parasites and saying that he was better

¹²⁵ Ibid., CIA: OCI, “Iran’s ‘White Revolution,’” June 10, 1966.

¹²⁶ Jay Walz, “Iran’s Shah Leads a ‘White Revolution,’” *The New York Times Magazine*, October 27, 1963.

¹²⁷ NACPM, CIA: OCI, “Shah’s Reforms to be Given Election Test in Iran,” September 6, 1963.

¹²⁸ Ibid., CIA: OCI, “Iran’s ‘White Revolution,’” June 10, 1966.

¹²⁹ Ibid., CIA: OCI, “Shah’s Reforms to be Given Election Test in Iran,” September 6, 1963.

suited to interpret Islam than them.¹³⁰ The Shah's direct involvement caused Khomeini to shift his focus from Prime Minister Alam to the dynasty itself, noting that the rise or fall of administrations mattered little if the monarchy itself was to blame. He calls on his audience to

realize that this event cannot be compared to the former disturbance (concerning the Provincial and District Councils Bill) nor can we respond to it in the same way. On the face of things that disturbance concerned the government...In this case however, that with which we are now confronted and against which we are directing our grievances and opposition is the Shah himself—someone who now finds his life hanging in the balance; and as he himself stated, to succumb on this occasion would mean his downfall and ruin¹³¹

The Shah is not attacked for his surface intentions, but rather his hidden intent to “delude and mislead” and lay an “elaborate trap” at the end of a “series of deceptive, misleading moves.”¹³² This history of betrayal and deception goes back to his betrayal in 1955, after which he never regained the trust of the ulama.

In order to overwhelm and overshadow the clerical opposition, large rallies were organized throughout January in support of the White Revolution. These rallies were largely filled by government employees and workers from certain companies, like Pepsi, who would gather to praise the Shah and the reform initiatives.¹³³ The fact that a Baha'i ran Pepsi helped neither the regime nor the Baha'is.

When a delay in the national referendum on the White Revolution was suggested, because of bad weather, the Shah rejected this and insisted that it must be held before January 27 (the first day of Ramadan), since

¹³⁰ Ibid., NFAC (CIA), “Islam in Iran,” p. 14.

¹³¹ Khomeini, *Kauthar*, pp. 47-48 [January 1963].

¹³² Ibid., p. 48.

¹³³ USDS, *Iran, 1960-1962*, Reel 3: 20.

information had been obtained that the Mullahs may launch a campaign against the Baha'is during the fasting period of Ramadan. Mr. Alam reminded me that the Mullahs had attacked the Baha'is during Ramadan some ten years ago and that a number of people had been killed. He did not expect a repeat in 1963 but concluded that stern measures might have to be taken and, if so, it was much better to have this occur after the referendum had been completed.¹³⁴

On the eve of the January 1963 referendum, the Shah was praised by American representatives for having finally “made a clean and irrevocable break with the traditional moneyed, land-owning, and religious elites on whom he relied so heavily in the past.”¹³⁵

On the day of the referendum, Khomeini accepted that little could be done to stop its approval, but found hope in the idea of eventual victory. He told the opposition to take heart, saying:

Do not let these rusty bayonets frighten you, they will soon be broken. This government cannot oppose the demands of a great nation with bayonets, and sooner or later it will be defeated. ... Instead of bullying and using bayonets, they should accept the wishes of the people and realize that they cannot silence the people or make them surrender with bayonets, nor can they use coercion to prevent the clergy from performing the duties with which Islam has charged them.¹³⁶

The referendum, which was generally considered to have been rigged, passed overwhelmingly. Although women were not originally going to be allowed to vote until later elections, this was changed at the last minute and they were told to “set up their own ballot boxes” and several special polling places were reserved just for women. This was disregarded, however, and women were seen “intermingling in queues with men and casting votes in the same ballot boxes” and “women appeared elated rather than awed by

¹³⁴ Ibid., 4.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 13.

¹³⁶ Khomeini, *Kauthar*, pp 61-62 [January 26, 1963].

the experience of voting.”¹³⁷ The landlords and clergy, on the other hand, were said to be “frightened, confused and furious” and to be “demoralized” and unsure of what to do next.¹³⁸

In the first meeting with Alam after the passage of the referendum, he was described as “elated” and said that the Shah was “in a state of exhilaration and great confidence.” On January 24, immediately before the referendum, the Shah had gone to Qom to “show his defiance of the Mullahs in one of their most important strongholds.” Alam said that the Shah made this decision himself and it showed his astuteness and courage. The Prime Minister “felt that the political power of the Mullahs in any national terms had been destroyed.” He clarified that “it was not the Shah’s purpose nor that of the Government to destroy the institution of the Moslem clergy” but insisted that it “could not allow them to remain as a political obstacle to progress.” He related that the Shah was so elated by the outcome of his gambit that he was thinking of allowing “completely free elections,” although this “may well mean one thing in the United States and quite another thing in Persia.”¹³⁹

When Sir Geoffrey Harrison (the British Ambassador) left his post in April 1963, he noted that “The Shah seems suddenly to have acquired a new sense of purpose. He is now more firmly convinced than ever before of his personal mission to lead his country through the difficult transition from a feudal to a progressive State.” In his first dispatch in April 1963, however, the new British Ambassador (Denis Wright), who had extensive

¹³⁷ USDS, *Iran, 1960-1962*, Reel 3: 36.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 15; NACPM, CIA: OCI, *Current Intelligence Weekly Summary*, February 1, 1963.

¹³⁹ USDS, *Iran, 1960-1962*, Reel 3: 55.

previous experience serving in Iran in the 1950s, was more pessimistic, and felt that “the country is waiting for leadership which... the Shah never quite provides.”¹⁴⁰

In the months after the referendum, despite being blacklisted by the press, the ulama attacked the Shah and his policies through leaflets, posters, and sermons. At the end of February, on *Eid al-Fitr* (the holiday marking the conclusion of Ramadan), there were anti-government sermons and a clerical boycott of the Shah’s celebrations. Just before the Persian New Year (at the end of March), leaflets called for mourning instead of celebration.¹⁴¹ All major clerics supported this initiative and major ayatollahs released statements condemning the enfranchisement of women. Although they did not have access to the radio or mainstream media, the message of the clerical opposition was successfully spread nationally through sermons and leaflets created by a clandestine Islamic press.¹⁴² In early 1963, several Islamic organizations formed a coalition to coordinate protest action, and began to collectively target the Shah directly.¹⁴³

The Shah responded to clerical opposition by sending more than a thousand troops into Qom on March 22, 1963. In this attack, SAVAK utilized a motley crew of agents, toughs from South Tehran, peasants, and employees of the Tehran bus company.¹⁴⁴ The attack was (rather unconvincingly) staged as an attack by peasants in favor of land reform against the “black reactionaries” blocking Iran’s progress, and is most widely remembered for the storming of the Fayziyeh *madrassa* (religious school) and the brutal assaults on Khomeini’s charges. This was part of a larger “harassment campaign of the government aimed at weakening the mullahs in fact and in the public

¹⁴⁰ TNAPRO, FCO 17 / 1516, “Valedictory Despatch,” April 20, 1971.

¹⁴¹ NACPM, NFAC (CIA), “Islam in Iran,” p. 14.

¹⁴² Ibid., Subject numeric, 1967-69, Box 2219, Pol Iran-US, semi-annual assessment, August 1, 1967.

¹⁴³ Ibid., NFAC (CIA), “Islam in Iran,” p. 15.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., Subject-numeric 1964-66 / Box 3225, Soc 12 Religion, “the Iranian Shia Moslem Clergy,” June 17, 1964.

eye."¹⁴⁵ An April 1963 report notes that SAVAK carried out a number of similar staged episodes in order to make the clergy look bad, a tactic that the CIA had used earlier against Tudeh.¹⁴⁶ In the same month, the Shah claimed that he had "broken the back" of the religious opposition.¹⁴⁷

In response to these anti-clerical initiatives, Khomeini released a leaflet claiming that Islam itself was being destroyed "by the filthy hand of the foreigners" who were controlling the Shah, and that he should be removed in favor of a regime that would rule according to the Qur'an.¹⁴⁸ A CIA report notes that for the first time the Shah was personally targeted (rather than the majles or the Cabinet) and that a major theme of these unprecedented attacks on the person of the Shah was the accusation that he "had become a puppet of the Baha'is, a sect that in turn was controlled by the Jews."¹⁴⁹

In a March letter to merchants and guilds in Qom, Khomeini emphasized the "Baha'i" aspects of the struggle. He warns:

The noble Qur'an and Islam are in danger, the independence of the country and its economy are in the clutches of the Zionists who in Iran are manifest in the form of the Baha'i party, and in no time at all, if the Muslims maintain their lethal silence, they will, with the help of their agents, seize all the economic institutions of this country and the presence of the Muslim nation in all the country's affairs will be eliminated. [Baha'i-owned] Iranian television has become a base for Jewish spies, and the government is aware of this and supports it. The Muslim nation will not be silent until this danger is removed, and if anyone is silent, then he will be responsible before God the Almighty and will be condemned to ruin in this world.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., RG 306 / 306 / 490 / 63 / 8 / 5-6 / Box 294, CI Iran, June 11, 1963.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., Subject-numeric 1963 / Box 3941, Pol Iran, April 6, 1963.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., Subject-numeric 1963 / Box 3942, Pol 14 Elections, April 16, 1963.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., NFAC (CIA), "Islam in Iran," p. 14.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁵⁰ Khomeini, *Sahifa-ye Nur*, Vol. 1 (Tehran: Vizarat-e Irshad-e Islami, 1983), p. 34 [Esfand 1341 / March 1963]. (Quoted on http://www2.trib.ir/worldservice/imam/palestin_E/5.htm).

Khomeini saw the SAVAK-led attack on the Fayziyeh *madrasa*, and the general terror inflicted on Qom in general, as inhuman and unforgivable. On the commemoration of this event, forty days later, he claimed that the Shah was worse than Genghis Khan, since he engaged in similar behavior (destroying centers of learning, killing, wounding, humiliating, and terrorizing the clergy), but he did so while simultaneously claiming to be a Shi'ite Muslim. This new assessment was projected backwards, to the beginning of his rule:

It must be said that this is not a recent matter relating to the past few months only, but rather it is one which has a long history, having first developed several years ago. If not forty-odd years, then it was at least twenty years ago that it was decided that Qum must be wiped out. It was during the lifetime of the late Ayatollah Borujerdi (May he rest in paradise) that they in fact decided to do away with both the Ayatollah as a religious authority and Qum as a religious center.¹⁵¹

He briefly acknowledges the problem some had with Borujerdi's leadership, saying that he "was seen by some in a certain light; but this is not the place to elaborate upon this." In spite of problems with his policies, Borujerdi was recast as the shield of the Islamic nation against the secret plans of the Shah. In this new narrative:

They realized that trouble would arise if they took action whilst [Borujerdi] was alive. Once he had ascended to the abode of the blessed, they immediately began to attack this religious center of Qum... because they wanted Qum not to exist. Qum was a thorn in their flesh...they made plans to destroy the clergy and then to destroy Islam and afterwards to realize the interests of Israel and her agents [i.e. the Baha'is]. This was the case from the beginning but it was concealed, their plans not being publicized. To a certain extent they had in fact informed the public of their intentions, but they spoke of their infidel programme in very mild, diluted terms.¹⁵²

¹⁵¹ Khomeini, *Kauthar*, p. 93 [May 2, 1963].

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

Mourning the March attacks on Qom, in which the Shah's men "beat and broke the limbs and necks of our children and loved ones, killing some by flinging them from the roof," Khomeini admonishes the Shah for turning against Islam and for ignoring the clerical counsel that had traditionally advised the Iranian monarchy:

In fact, in the past it was the ulama... who were the ministers and advisers to the Muslim rulers. But who are the advisers now? Israel! Our counselors are Jews [i.e. Baha'is]! In the *Dunya* newspaper they themselves acknowledged the donation of five hundred dollars to each of two thousand Baha'is (the wretch hadn't better deny this since it was actually in the press); that's five hundred dollars from the wealth of this Muslim nation—in addition to offering a one-thousand-and-twenty *toman* discount on each of their air fares. And what was this for? It was for their journey to London to participate in an anti-Islamic meeting. They were thus afforded the highest respect. On the contrary, our pilgrims have to bear the most severe hardships and sometimes even have to offer bribes just to obtain permission for their journey; and even then only a few are actually successful... My God man, are you indeed a Jew [Baha'i]? And our country, is that Jewish [Baha'i] too?¹⁵³

It is clear from the context that when Khomeini says "Jews" he is actually referring to Baha'is. The event in London that Khomeini refers to is the 1963 Baha'i World Congress, which celebrated the religion's first century of existence. Later in the same speech, he makes it more explicit that he is really referring to Baha'is when he says "Jews," since he believes the Baha'is to be the medium through which Israel operates in Iran.

Woe to those mute ulama and to the silent cities of Najaf, Qom, Tehran and Mashhad. This deadly silence will cause our country and our honor and dignity to be trampled beneath the boots of the Israelis by means of these very Baha'is. Then woe to us; woe to this Islam; woe to these Muslims... Do not choose to remain silent since to do so today is to support the tyrannical system. I was informed that [Habib Sabet, a prominent Baha'i] was given a discount in a deal made between himself and the Oil Company, in which he made a profit of twenty-five million *tomans*; or in truth it was those who were sent to the anti-Islamic meeting in

¹⁵³ Ibid., pp. 101-03.

London [i.e. the Baha'i World Congress] who actually profited. That is the current state of our oil industry, our foreign currency, our national airline and our ministers; and that is how things are for all of us. Then are we still to say nothing?! Ought we really remain silent and not complain?¹⁵⁴

Despite the failures and persecution of 1963, Khomeini claims that it was a good year, because "It made the world realize that it is the clergy alone which speaks out against and confronts both oppression and the oppressor and injustice and the unjust." In the conclusion of this oration, the Baha'i issue is again raised:

So why don't you (the ulama) speak out and say what they are actually doing? Now that Islam is threatened by Judaism and the Jewish Party, which in fact constitutes the Baha'i Party, it is time for all of the ulama of Islam to speak with one voice; and for the orators, speakers and religious students to unitedly declare unequivocally that they don't want Judaism [Baha'ism] to determine the destiny of their country.¹⁵⁵

In a later proclamation in May, Khomeini again raises the Baha'i issue:

Know that the danger facing Islam today is no less than the danger posed by the Umayyads. The tyrant's government, with all of its forces, assists Israel and its agents (the misguided and misleading [Bahais]). It has handed the information media over to them. In the royal court, they receive whatever they want. It has opened positions for them in the military, the ministry of culture and all of the other ministries and given them all of the sensitive posts. Remind the people of the danger posed by Israel and its agents [the Baha'is]... Express your disgust at this treacherous government for mobilizing and sending several thousand [Baha'i] enemies of both Islam and nation to London to participate in an anti-Islamic and anti-nation assembly [i.e. the First Baha'i World congress]. These days, to be silent is to support the tyrant's government and to succor the enemies of Islam.¹⁵⁶

Also in May, Ayatollah Shariatmadari wrote a letter to the ulama in Kerman in which he lamented that the government continued to strengthen and support the Baha'is and allowed them to hold high and influential positions. He claimed that the Baha'is

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., pp. 103-05.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., pp. 109-10.

¹⁵⁶ Tavakoli-Targhi. "Anti-Baha'ism," p. 222.

were a political party, not a religion, and that they were the agents of imperialism within Iran. A June 1963 statement by the Society of Iran's Clergy, likewise argues:

[Baha'is] are the middlemen of the Israeli state in our government... [and] have infiltrated the most sensitive organizations in government and, every day, their influence increases in all of the departments, even the prime minister's cabinet... [T]he clergy can never accept this great shame to be brought on the Muslims of Iran and can never tolerate the influence of the agents of Zionism and their middlemen, i.e. the Baha'is, in their government.¹⁵⁷

The most interesting part of this is the admission of not being able to accept the “great shame” of growing Baha'i influence, and the chastisement of various clerical audiences for their “lethal silence,” which allowed this to happen. Even in 1963, the sting of the failure of 1955 was still there. This persistence of the status quo vis-à-vis Baha'ism was a continuing source of stress and embarrassment, as this issue had become fetishized as the standard for measuring Iran's Islamicization or lack thereof. The idea that this continued presence was unbearable is also evident in the increasing use of euphemisms, such as “imperialism's instruments and Zionism's agents,” to avoid direct reference to Baha'is.¹⁵⁸ There is no hesitation to use words such as “Jew” or “Zionism,” but “Baha'i” was avoided, and Baha'is were referred to indirectly on almost all occasions, except when explicitness was needed for the sake of clarity, or when the symbolic power of the word could be invoked to great and damning effect.

The conflict between the clerical opposition and the Court continued to escalate until it reached a climax in Moharram. On Ashura (June 3, 1963), Khomeini directly and crassly attacked the Shah in the powerful setting of the Fayziyeh *madrasa* (that had been

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., pp. 222-23.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p 223

attacked in March). In his infamous speech on this occasion, Khomeini compares the Shah to Yazid (the one responsible for the cruel killing of Imam Husayn and a number of innocents, about thirteen centuries before, on that very day). It was this rhetorical escalation that resulted in Khomeini's arrest shortly thereafter.

Looking beyond this famous comparison, the rest of the speech contains many of the themes repeated throughout the year, including the Baha'i issue. Khomeini at first indirectly refers to Baha'ism by attacking the "agents of Israel," which was a common euphemism for the Baha'is, as discussed above.

It was Israel that assaulted the [Fayziyeh madrasa] by means of its sinister agents. It is assaulting us too and you, the nation; it wishes to seize your economy, to destroy your trade and agriculture and to appropriate your wealth leaving this country without. Anything, which proves to be a barrier, or blocks its path is to be removed by means of its agents [the Baha'is].¹⁵⁹

Later in the same speech, he explicitly names the Baha'is as the agents of Israel and discusses the danger that he believes they represent.

Is Israel His Majesty's friend? Israel will cause the country's collapse. Through its [Baha'i] agents, Israel will cause the dissolution of the monarchy; but beware, for one thing is certain—if, gentlemen, you take a look at the Bahai [publication] of two or three years ago, you will read: "Abdu'l-Baha advocates equal rights for men and women;" and this is the line that has been adopted by them. Then the ignorant Mr. Shah also steps forward and talks of equal rights for men and women! You poor wretch, they have purposely set you up so that they can say that you are a Baha'i, and so that I in turn denounce you as an unbeliever and you are finally got rid of. Do not continue in this way, you fool; do not do it.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ Khomeini, *Kauthar*, p. 122 [June 3, 1963].

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

The assumption that his audience is fully familiar with the name and position of ‘Abdu’l-Baha (the son of the founder of the Baha’i religion) is itself a powerful indicator of the extent and naturalization of anti-Baha’i polemic. He continues:

Enfranchisement for women is what ‘Abdul Baha advocates. The [Baha’i book] in question is available, so why not read it. Has the Shah not seen this? If not then those who have seen it and have set this poor wretch up to say these things are to be rebuked... Both our country and our religion are in jeopardy. You repeatedly tell the ulama not to mention that our religion is endangered; but if we do not say this does that mean that our religion is in fact not in danger? If we do not mention what the Shah is like, does that mean he is not like that? Indeed, you must do something to change this situation. You are being blamed for everything. You helpless creature, you do not realize that on the day when a true outburst occurs, not one of these so-called friends of yours will want to know you.¹⁶¹

The speech also implicitly acknowledges SAVAK’s history of controlling the ulama at Moharram, discussed in the previous chapter. Khomeini does not refer to previous years, but discusses SAVAK’s attempt to dictate content in Moharram 1963. This could be openly admitted because, unlike earlier years, SAVAK scripts were not followed in 1963. Khomeini relates the events of that morning:

I was informed today that a number of preachers were taken to the offices of SAVAK and were told that they could speak about anything they chose other than three subjects: they were not to say anything bad about the Shah, not to attack Israel [i.e. her Baha’i agents], and not to say that Islam is endangered. The problem is that if we do not concern ourselves with these three subjects then what else is there to talk about? All of our difficulties without exception stem from these three issues.¹⁶²

As a result of his attacks on the Shah, Khomeini was arrested on June 5, along with other leaders in Qom. These arrests led to riots in Tehran, Qom, and elsewhere that were put down violently, with anywhere from several hundred to several thousand killed.

¹⁶¹ Ibid.

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 125.

The revolts included crowds in the tens of thousands, led by those wearing the black mourning colors of Moharram. The rioters targeted symbols of authority like power plants, police station, radio offices, telephone booths, the semi-official *Ettela'at* newspaper, and properties owned by Jews and Baha'is.¹⁶³

Although this uprising is often remembered as involving the nation as a whole, it was actually limited to a few cities. A June 18, 1963 report, for example, notes that in Isfahan there was a mixture of apathy and state coercion that prevented any significant demonstrations. The senior clerics in Isfahan were described as cowed, while more minor clerics attempted to get involved but were censored and pressured into silence.¹⁶⁴

SAVAK agents were embarrassed by the extent of the 1963 protests, especially since they had supposedly been so overconfident that they had not even bothered translating their training material on what to do in the case of mass demonstrations.¹⁶⁵ In a June 24 conversation about the riots, the Shah said that the lesson that should be taken from the uprising is that they should have fired into the crowd earlier and been less lenient, and that SAVAK was not adequate and needed to be improved and expanded. He insisted that the clergy were not in a position to say or do anything vis-à-vis the government and that the White Revolution would continue. He might allow them some face-saving gesture, but they were not in a position of strength and he intended to bring religion fully under governmental management through the White Revolution, and that this would be a final solution to the clerical problem.¹⁶⁶

¹⁶³ NACPM, Subject-numeric 1963, Box 3942, Pol 22, July 18, 1963; Mohsen Milani, *The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution: From Monarchy to Islamic Republic* (Boulder: Westview, 1994), p. 92.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid., Subject-numeric 1963, Box 3942, Pol 15-2, June 18, 1963.

¹⁶⁵ Fardust, *The Rise and Fall of the Pahlavi Dynasty*, p. 303.

¹⁶⁶ NACPM, Subject-numeric 1963, Box 3943, Pol Iran-a, June 24, 1963.

Denis Wright, looking back on his long service in Iran, identifies two key moments in modern Iranian history: the aftermath of the anti-Baha'i pogrom of 1955, and the riots of June 1963. He recalls how, months after the conclusion of the anti-Baha'i pogrom, he was at a farewell dinner that the Shah had thrown in his honor in 1955, before he left Iran for the first time. On this occasion:

I remember... sitting after dinner in the moonlight at Saadabad and suggesting, on instructions from London, that he should follow his father's example by taking a much firmer line with the reactionary Mullahs who had been responsible for a violent anti-Baha'i outburst earlier in the year. The Shah then told me that he was not strong enough to do this. But in June 1963 when the Muharram riots, inspired by the Mullahs and conservative land owners, broke out he showed unexpected resolution in dealing with the trouble makers. I believe his action then will come to be regarded as the turning point in the history of modern Iran... In my judgment, if he had not so acted he might well have lost his throne; certainly his reform programme would have been jeopardised, if not completely destroyed."¹⁶⁷

1964

After ten months of imprisonment, Khomeini was released in April 1964. He initially avoided active engagement with the regime, but continued his criticisms, again returning to the Baha'i issue. In his view:

The entire country's economy now lies in Israel's hands; that is to say it has been seized by Israeli agents [i.e. the Baha'is]. Hence, most of the major factories and enterprises are run by them: the television... Pepsi Cola... Make firm your ranks. These are the agents of imperialism and they must be uprooted... They have taken everything from us. They have taken the television and radio from us. The television lies in the hands of that fraud and the radio is in the hands of the regime itself; and as for the press, that too is corrupt.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ TNAPRO, FCO 17 / 1516, "Valedictory Despatch," April 20, 1971.

¹⁶⁸ Khomeini, *Kauthar*, pp. 136-38 [April 10, 1964].

Again, he is here referring to the Baha'is by mentioning "Israel." By "that fraud" he is referring to Habib Sabet, a prominent Baha'i who ran the Pepsi franchise in Iran and also brought television to Iran.¹⁶⁹ The reference to radio access being taken away is a reference to the blacklisting of politically active clergy after the anti-Baha'i pogrom of 1955. In this same speech Khomeini notes that the regime has tried to use the press to create the impression that the ulama were now in support of the White Revolution being conducted by "the Shah and the nation." Rejecting this, he asks, "Which nation? Is this revolution really anything to do with the clergy and the people?" He also notes that the regime has tried to mark him as "Khomeini the traitor" when, in his view, they were the ones who had betrayed the nation.¹⁷⁰

By 1964, the tragedy of the regime's public violence in Moharram 1963 had started to replace anti-Baha'ism's discursive importance as the unifying issue of the Islamic movement. Anti-Baha'ism was not totally abandoned (and is, indeed, still very much on display in the Islamic Republic), but it was discursively replaced by the Moharram massacre and faded somewhat in importance.¹⁷¹ This re-positioning of

¹⁶⁹ Pepsi cola was forbidden in a number of *fatwas* because it was run locally by a Baha'i (Sabet). Ayatollah Shariatmadari, for example, ruled that:

It is not permitted to buy, sell, promote (*tabligh*), or drink Pepsi and... what is connected to the misguided and misguiding (*zaleh va mozeleh*) Bahai sect, since a share of their profits has been used in order to further the destruction of Islam and the building up of unbelief. Muslims... must not strengthen the façade (*jebheh*) of irreligion.

Likewise, Ayatollah Milani ruled that: "Every individual who is attached to Islam and believes in the Holy Mahdi, the Imam of the Age, must abstain from drinking, buying, or selling the following beverages – Pepsi Cola, Schwepps ..." (Jafarian, *Jaryanha*, p. 378 n2.).

¹⁷⁰ Khomeini, *Kauthar*, pp. 138-39.

¹⁷¹ In later years, when Khomeini was in exile in France and in Sunni areas, he rarely mentioned the peculiarly Iranian Baha'i issue, instead usually framing the Revolutionary movement in ways that were comprehensible to an international audience. When he did bring the Baha'is up, they were treated as a symptom rather than the cause of Iran's problems (whereas in the 1950s they were identified as the source of the problem).

Moharram 1963 can be seen in the April 1964 speech quoted above, which was Khomeini's first public opportunity to address the tragedy. He swears:

As long as the nation lives it will mourn the events of the 15th of Khordad [June 5, 1963, the day of the riots and their brutal suppression]. A government official once said in a speech that the 15th of Khordad was a disgrace to the Iranian nation; I wish to complete this statement: the 15th of Khordad was a disgrace to the nation because weapons were procured with the money of this nation and it was with these very same weapons that they killed the people!¹⁷²

In a speech five days later, Khomeini again referenced the uprising and claimed that "The nation of Islam has arisen and will never again acquiesce. Even if I make a U-turn or compromise with you (the Shah), the nation surely will not."¹⁷³

Despite Khomeini's tough words, the religious opposition was strictly disciplined in 1964, although it was felt that the ulama had "shot their bolt" the previous year and had little chance of ever repeating such a scenario. Moharram was strictly regulated and the Shah made it clear that any resistance in the holy month would be "dealt with severely," and that the military was to maintain "order at any cost." With strict discipline, and many leaders of the previous year's uprising still imprisoned, there were no large demonstrations in Moharram 1964, since the previous year's massacres had made it clear that "force will be decisively used by the government when necessary."¹⁷⁴

Despite the lack of overt opposition, the ulama remained critical and repeatedly demanded the release of clerics arrested the previous year. Ayatollah Qomi, for example, claimed that the people were alienated from a government which "is maintained by force" and fills its jails with those "whose only crime was support for religion." He proposed

¹⁷² Khomeini, *Kauthar*, p. 145.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 172 [April 15, 1963].

¹⁷⁴ NACPM, Subject-numeric 1964-66 / Box 2332, Pol 13 non-party blocs, Tehran to State Department, June 24, 1964.

that the only possible explanation was that the government is controlled by "Jews and Bahais." In his view, these two groups "have a vast and pernicious influence in Iran and in the world," are "enemies of Islam," and, in Iran, "a large part of commerce is in their hands."¹⁷⁵ It was (falsely) claimed that Alam was a Baha'i, and the regime was repeatedly smeared by mentioning the prominence of Baha'is like Ayadi and Sabet and those with Baha'i backgrounds, like Ebtehaj.

As part of their opposition, the ulama "still caters to the prejudices of many devout Iranians against Bahais, Jews and foreigners in general. At present, it uses these issues primarily to embarrass the regime." This strategy was effective because, unlike previous opposition to "un-Islamic" policies, the clergy were now practicing populism and, in so doing, were no longer "isolated from the mainstreams of articulate Iranian political opinion," since they were avoiding religious rhetoric and instead attacking the regime "on such issues as corruption, unconstitutionality, foreign control of oil resources and 'imperialism and colonialism,' about which non-religious sectors of Iranian society are also concerned."¹⁷⁶

Khomeini's network also used the Baha'i issue in its expansion and recruitment efforts. In 1964, his supporters began to travel across Iran, denouncing the regime for corruption, immorality, and support of Baha'ism. Two supporters from Qom, for example, traveled to Abadan and Khorramshahr to denounce local officials as corrupt and immoral, and to condemn Pepsi as a Baha'i product.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., Memo of conversation between Ayatollah Qomi and the American Consul (Mashhad), February 23, 1965.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., Box 3225, Soc 12 Religion, "the Iranian Shia Moslem Clergy," June 17, 1964.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., Box 2332, Pol 13 non-party blocs, Khorramshahr Consulate to State Department, July 15, 1964.

In a speech on September 9, 1964, Khomeini himself again returns to the Baha'i threat, using euphemisms such as "Israeli" and "worse than a Jew":

In this country, the television is independent and is controlled by an Israeli [i.e. a Baha'i, Sabet]. He says whatever he wants...Here, somebody "worse than a Jew" should control the television and propagate whatever he wishes, yet we are not free to propagate our ideas! "Oh no, these reactionaries should not speak," is what they say, but where is the reaction? All we are saying is that you should be united; all Muslims should be united.¹⁷⁸

In the same speech he continues:

These people, these Israeli agents in Iran [the Baha'is], wherever you look in the country they are there. They occupy all the key posts, the sensitive posts in the country, and this, by God, could prove to be dangerous for the throne of this man [the Shah]. They do not realize this. It was these people who plotted in Shemiran [a district in northern Tehran] to kill Nasir al-Din Shah and take control of the country.¹⁷⁹ Look at history; it relates how they plotted, how a few people tried to assassinate Nasir al-Din Shah in Niavaran, and how a group of people in Tehran tried to seize power. These people think that they should govern. They have written in their books, in their articles, that governance belongs to them, that they should create a new monarchy, a new government, a just government. These people who have such malicious ideas and evil intentions are found throughout the country from the court down. Sir, you should be afraid of these people, they are such animals. Some of them can be found in the ministries. I pointed one of them out to one of the ministers and he told me I was mistaken. Then I sent him documented evidence to prove my claim, but the man, I shall not mention his dirty name, is still there. They are in the ministries and they are in the army. O you respected army personnel, you are Muslim, hit these people in the mouth! A lot of the army leaders are good people and they sometimes contact me, they send messages to me. Most of them are good people, and so they should intervene and stop these people who are against their religion, who are against their throne and crown, their country, their independence, their economy. You have to stop them. Go and ask that they be thrown out of the army, ask your superiors to throw them out. I swear to God I want your well-being. I am worried that one day you will open your eyes and see that they have destroyed your wealth, your being. I'm worried about this. If you will not stop them, then let us destroy them. I shall

¹⁷⁸ Khomeini, *Kauthar*, pp. 191-92 [September 9, 1964].

¹⁷⁹ This is a reference to a failed assassination attempt by a group of frustrated Babis in 1852, shortly after the execution of the Bab. This Babi violence was later denounced by Baha'u'llah, who rejected the idea of holy war. Khomeini's polemic has to resort to a Babi example because there are no examples of Baha'is attacking the Iranian government. For more information on the failed Babi plot, see: Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe*, pp. 204-18.

destroy them one day. I do not want to create disturbances. If you do not want to have trouble you should destroy them yourself; if you do not, you'll see that one day something else happens in some other way and at that time neither I can stop them nor you. This is the situation that we are faced with; you see it and we see it. I don't know what we should do about it or how we should put it right.¹⁸⁰

On October 26, Khomeini again directly denounced the Shah, this time for a bill that he believed sold Iran's independence in exchange for a loan that would only benefit the corrupt upper class. This "status-of-forces agreement" gave American forces in Iran, and their dependents, immunity from Iranian law. Khomeini claimed that, under the new law, an American servant could kill the Shah and not be punished, while the Shah would be taken to task for killing even a pet of the Americans. As part of his attack on the bill, Khomeini claimed that the government targeted the clergy while giving a free hand to Israeli agents in Iran [i.e. the Baha'is]. With the new law, the Shah was supposedly confirming that Iran was a "colony" and its people "enslaved." In his opinion the Shah and his associates "are all traitors and betray Iran."¹⁸¹ He states:

So, the influence of the religious leaders is harmful to the nation? No, it is harmful to you, harmful to you traitors, not to the nation! You have realized that as long as the influence of the religious leaders exists you cannot do everything you want to do, commit all the crimes you want, so you wish to destroy their influence... Why did you do this? Why have you sold us? Are we your slaves that you sell us? We did not elect you to be our representatives, and even had we done so, you would forfeit your posts now on account of this act of treachery. This is high treason! O God, they have committed treason against this country. O God, this government has committed treason against this country, against Islam, against the Qur'an. All the members of both houses who gave their agreement to this affair are traitors. Those old men in the Senate are traitors, and all those in the lower house who voted in favor of this affair are traitors. They are not our representatives. The whole world must know that they are not the representatives of Iran! Or, suppose they are, now I dismiss them. They are dismissed from their posts and all the bills they have passed up until now are invalid... We do not recognize this as a law. We do not recognize this Parliament as a true Parliament.

¹⁸⁰ Khomeini, *Kauthar*, pp. 200-02.

¹⁸¹ NACPM, Subject-numeric 1964-66 / Box 2335, Pol political aff. + rel. pol 30 Iran, Tehran to State Department, November 10, 1964 (enclosures).

We do not recognize this government as a true government. They are traitors, traitors to the people of Iran! ...O God, destroy those individuals who are traitors to this land, who are traitors to Islam and to the Qur'an.¹⁸²

In addition to sermons, Khomeini distributed his message through handbills and called for the Shah to be overthrown. He demanded that the "rule of the bayonet should cease" and the state become "the true representatives of the people." He also denounced America for waging a war on Islam, claiming that "America considers Islam and the Holy Koran to be against its interests and is determined to destroy them and the clergy who are subjected to imprisonment and torture." America "treats the Moslem nations as savages" and has created a "medieval condition" in Iran by directing the Shah to imprison and torture religious leaders. Again, this is a reference to the aftermath of 1955, discussed in the previous chapter.

Although the clergy were often divided, Khomeini claimed that they had been united by the massacres of 1963 and the fact that Islam itself was in danger. To support his claim, he pointed out that a history textbook in Iran taught the young that eliminating clerical influence is in the best interests of the country, and that the clergy should be done away with permanently. He claimed that, with institutional survival at stake, the ulama would not go quietly, but would knock the teeth out of those who were trying to destroy them, and would not "remain silent while the Holy Koran is sold away."¹⁸³

Because of his fierce opposition to the status-of-forces bill, Khomeini was arrested a few days later, on November 4, and exiled to Turkey. By 1965, this

¹⁸² Khomeini, *Kauthar*, pp. 225-33 [October 26, 1964].

¹⁸³ NACPM, Subject-numeric 1964-66 / Box 2335, Pol political aff. + rel. pol 30 Iran, Tehran to State Department, November 10, 1964 (enclosures).

arrangement was proving unsatisfactory, and Khomeini was transferred to Najaf, Iraq in October 1965.

Why Khomeini?

Americans diplomats increasingly identified Khomeini as the “leader” of the ulama in 1963 and thereafter, and this identification became a self-fulfilling prophecy. Because of his prominent opposition to the regime, and to American interests in Iran, American officers became increasingly obsessed with Khomeini, and constantly asked everyone, from taxi drivers to ayatollahs, whether they thought Khomeini would succeed Borujerdi.¹⁸⁴ The answer was always “no,” but the American obsession with his possible candidacy served to further increase Khomeini’s prominence and importance because of the perception that the Americans were afraid of him.

One American report found it strange that Khomeini opposes change even though he is the leading expert on *ejtehad* (the mechanism for adapting Islamic law to changing circumstances).¹⁸⁵ The important part of this observation is that Khomeini is framed by these American reports as Shi’ism’s leading expert in jurisprudence, when in reality no informed person ranked Khomeini this highly in this area. Khomeini’s leadership in opposing American interests was transferred to other areas as he became framed by the Americans as the “leader” in all respects.

An American report noted that the government mishandling of Khomeini was also making him popular and leading others to imitate him. As Khomeini became more popular, ayatollahs realized that they had to support him or else risk their own popularity

¹⁸⁴ See, for example: NACPM, Subject-numeric 1964-66, Box 2330, Pol 2, December 21, 1964.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid., RG 59 / 150 / 69 / 30 / 07 / Box 4, Pol 13-6 Religious Groups, "The significance of Khomeini's opposition to the Iranian government," January 7, 1965.

and standing.¹⁸⁶ After he was arrested and faced possible execution, the pressure to protect him compelled the senior ayatollahs to label Khomeini a *marja'* in order to give him a degree of protection, regardless of his lack of scholarly qualifications.¹⁸⁷

Khomeini's promotion to the top tier was further enhanced when Behbahani, his benefactor and silent partner, died, and Khomeini took over his patron's network of supporters. As his organization developed a military wing, he also won over many former members of the Fedaiyan-e Islam.¹⁸⁸

In a May 1964 conversation about Khomeini's popularity, Seyyed Hossein Nasr cautioned that although Khomeini is a decent man, "the man whose picture hangs in every shop and home in Persia" is

a result of circumstances that Khomeini himself did not in any significant way influence or control... The government's actions over the past year have pushed Khomeini into the role of the leader of Shia Islam... Under normal circumstances, Khomeini would not have been a candidate for the position of leader of Shia Islam.¹⁸⁹

He noted that Khomeini's scholarship was subpar and "Until the last year, Khomeini was removed by his own temperament and his intellectual bent from any religious political activity." Unlike the later myth of Khomeini's supposedly lifelong revolutionary bent, restrained by Borujerdi, Nasr notes in 1964 that Khomeini was apolitical previously and that he did not always emulate Borujerdi. In his experience with him:

¹⁸⁶ Arnold Hottinger, "Correspondent on SAVAK, Corruption as Causes of Present Crisis," *Europa-Archiv*, January 25, 1979, pp. 43-52.

¹⁸⁷ For an account of SAVAK's role in this promotion, see: Fatemeh Pakravan, in an interview recorded by Habib Ladjevardi, March 3, 1983, Paris, France. Iranian Oral History Collection, Harvard University. Online: <<http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~iohp/pakravan.html>>. (20 January 2011).

¹⁸⁸ Rubin, *Into the Shadows*, p. 11.

¹⁸⁹ NACPM, RG 59 / 150 / 69 / 30 / 07 / Box 4, Pol 13-6 Religious Groups, Memo of conversation, May 8, 1964.

Khomeini possesses one unusual character trait that largely accounts for his spectacular rise to prominence, Nasr said. Once Khomeini has made up his mind on any subject or philosophical position, he will defend this position against all opposition. Nasr said many mullahs—most mullahs—will give in if a mujtahid (learned mullah) of higher rank or respect disagrees with a given opinion or conclusion. Khomeini apparently would not yield even to Borujerdi (the late leader of Shia Islam).¹⁹⁰

Nasr felt that Khomeini was “politically naïve” and “had no understanding or real interest in the changing political situation in Iran.” Since the chain of events of the preceding year had propelled him to be the mouthpiece for a movement, however,

Khomeini has in fact been forced to take a political attitude ill-suited to his character and training... Khomeini's speeches reflect the political views of the leading politically minded mullahs and not Khomeini himself. Khomeini, Nasr maintained, by his position of necessity must say these things.¹⁹¹

At the same time, Isfahani clerics identified Khomeini as the “leader” of the clerical opposition, but rejected the attempt to “stampede them into a premature consensus for Khomeini as *pishva* [leading *marja*’],”¹⁹² and considered other Ayatollahs, like Hakim and Shariatmadari, more suitable choices. Senior clerics did not think Khomeini’s candidacy was viable or realistic, but younger clerics, religious students, and elements in the bazaar largely supported his candidacy.

In 1965, Khomeini’s myth grew larger in his exile, and he was described as “the most popular man in Iran,” although many believed that the government had helped him to reach this position.¹⁹³ Former Prime Minister Sharif-Emami, for example, claimed that

¹⁹⁰ Ibid.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

¹⁹² Ibid., Subject-numeric 1964-66 / Box 2332, Pol 13 non-party blocs, Tehran to State Department, January 14, 1964.

¹⁹³ Ibid., RG 59 / 150 / 69 / 30 / 07 / Box 12, Folder pol 1 – gen pol, Memo of Conversation, January 27, 1965.

“Khomeini was of no importance until the government forced the issue with him.”¹⁹⁴

Mehdi Haeri-Yazdi (the son of the great *marja'* who reinvigorated Qom and taught Khomeini) also explained that Khomeini's prominence was the result of intense governmental pressure and that "The government's oppressive actions have made him more popular and very probably have made it inevitable that Khomeini will be the *pishva* [i.e. the leading *marja'*]." ¹⁹⁵

From Mansur to Hoveyda

While Khomeini was settling into his life in exile, his followers in Iran sought revenge. On January 22, 1965, Prime Minister Mansur was shot several times in an assassination attempt, and died from his injuries five days later. The assassin, Mohammad Bokhara'i, was a former member of the Fedai'yan-e Islam who had joined the military apparatus of Khomeini's organization. He later confessed that he had killed Mansur because of his actions against Khomeini.¹⁹⁶ In addition to Bokhara'i, several other former Fedai's were executed for the assassination and for conspiring to kill other targets, including the Shah. Many of Khomeini's lieutenants, like Hashemi Rafsanjani and Morteza Motahhari, were also rounded up and imprisoned.¹⁹⁷

Mansur was replaced as prime minister by his protégé, Amir-Abbas Hoveyda.

This appointment was problematic because Hoveyda's grandfather was a prominent Baha'i and his father had also been a Baha'i until he was forced out, in the early Shoghi

¹⁹⁴ Ibid., Memo of Conversation, February 9, 1965.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid., Box 11, Pol 13-6 Religious Groups, Memo of conversation, March 26, 1965.

¹⁹⁶ Abbas Milani, *The Persian Sphinx: Amir Abbas Hoveyda and the Riddle of the Iranian Revolution* (London: I.B. Taurus, 2000), pp. 171-72.

¹⁹⁷ Moin, *Khomeini*, p. 161.

Effendi period, for political involvement, which is forbidden for Baha'is.¹⁹⁸ In 1965, the general assumption was that Hoveyda was himself a Baha'i, although he denied this. British diplomatic reports at the time note that although Hoveyda appeared to be "an agnostic" and "is not a practicing Baha'i," this did not change the fact that "his father certainly was, and this fact is already proving ammunition for the opposition," since his Baha'i background "set clerical teeth on edge."¹⁹⁹ Alam even warned the Shah not to be out of the country long, since he feared that the opposition to Hoveyda could get out of hand. Despite this initial skepticism, Hoveyda surprised everyone by becoming the longest serving Prime Minister in the Pahlavi period. He was later judged to be successful because of "his knowledge of his limitations."²⁰⁰ For this reason:

Mr. Hoveyda is seen as the best example of what it takes to survive in contemporary Iranian politics. He is a manipulator of the system, finely attuned to the political realities of Iran and, most importantly, knows his position in relation to the shah—a low-profile administrator with no overt pretensions of aggrandizing his power.²⁰¹

During the long period of Hoveyda's premiership, several individuals rose to prominence who, like him, came from Baha'i families but were not themselves enrolled Baha'is. These included Mahnaz Afkhami, Minister for Women's Affairs, and Parviz Sabeti, SAVAK's head of internal security and the organization's public face. There was also General Sani'i, who was a practicing Baha'i, but was cast out for holding a political office (after he became the Minister of Defense). In any case, it was the Shah who selected who was to advance, not Hoveyda, and Sabeti was the only person on this list

¹⁹⁸ A succinct treatment of the Hoveyda issue can be found in Chehabi, "Anatomy of Prejudice," pp. 189, 196n.

¹⁹⁹ NACPM, Subject-numeric 1964-66 / Box 2332, Pol 15 - Gov, January 27, 1965; FO 371 / 180781, Wright to FO, January 30, 1965.

²⁰⁰ Ibid., Subject-numeric 1964-66 Box 2332, Pol 12, February 12, 1966.

²⁰¹ Ibid., NFAC (CIA), "Iran after the Shah: An Intelligence Assessment," August 1978.

who may have been directly promoted by Hoveyda because of a shared identity. An internal CIA study, for example, notes an unusual closeness between Hoveyda and Sabeti and speculates that they were united by their shared Baha'i background. Hoveyda had been friends with Sabeti since they were youth, and had given money to Sabeti while he was a student.²⁰²

Although only a small number of "Baha'is" advanced to prominence in the Hoveyda period, the clerical perception was that the promotion of Hoveyda and the rise of others from a Baha'i background was part of a deliberate strategy to de-Islamicize Iran. As discussed previously, even Alam faulted the Shah for allowing the impression to be created that "half" the Cabinet was Baha'i.²⁰³ During the Hoveyda period, Baha'ism and Pahlavism were increasingly conflated. Whereas, in earlier periods, this conflation caused the regime to be smeared with Baha'ism, now, as the regime itself became targeted, Baha'is became increasingly smeared as royalists. Thus, at the beginning of Khomeini's opposition, he called the Baha'is traitors because they supposedly sought to topple the Shah, while, on the eve of the Revolution, he considered them traitors because they did not want the Shah to be toppled.²⁰⁴

Conclusion

In earlier periods, individual politicians or elements in the government were accused of being Baha'i, but it was not until 1963 that the entire governmental system was denounced as "Baha'i." Whereas earlier accusations of Baha'ism were made with the

²⁰² Ibid.

²⁰³ This issue is discussed in Chapter III.

²⁰⁴ In 1963 and 1964, Khomeini attacked the Baha'is by claiming that they were traitors who planned to topple the Shah. Later, in October 1978, he claimed that "whoever says that he (the Shah) must remain or that it is better that he remains, does so because he is a traitor" (Khomeini, *Kauthar*, p. 556 [October 9, 1978]). After Khomeini came to power, Baha'is were among those targeted for loyalty to the Shah (among other pretexts).

aim of disciplining or replacing certain factions, or opposing specific policies, the wholesale denunciation of the regime as a whole involved the implicit call for the entire structure to be removed. It was, in short, a call for a change of regime.

This represented a new stage of anti-Baha'ism's evolution, as Baha'is were equated not only with Zionism and imperialism, but also with the regime itself. Since the regime was marked as 'Baha'i' and "Zionist," all of its attempts at social reformation were tainted as anti-national, catering to imperialism, and opposed to Islam. At the same time, this equation with the regime caused Baha'is to be blamed for the misdeeds and tyranny of the Shah, as they were already blamed for the actions of Israel. As a result, despite being avowedly apolitical and non-violent, the crimes and tyranny of the regime's secret police were etched into the side of the community.²⁰⁵ This conflation was a rather brilliant strategic move, as it greatly inhibited the regime's ability to engage in social reform while simultaneously limiting the appeal of the Baha'i Faith.

Despite continued concern over the Baha'i issue, after the events of Moharram 1963 this threat largely faded into the background as the Shah was directly targeted and Baha'i influence was seen as a symptom rather than a cause of the regime's corruption.²⁰⁶ As the Moharram 1963 massacres were discursively integrated into the clerical narrative as the opposition's birth in fire, the earlier currents of the Islamic movement became increasingly blotted from the collective memory. In a January 1978 speech, for example, Khomeini constructs a sacred history of the Islamic resistance that jumps from the

²⁰⁵ Tavakoli-Targhi, "Anti-Baha'ism," p. 224.

²⁰⁶ The Hojjiyeh was an exception to this trend.

oppression of the Reza Shah period to the oppression of 1963, ignoring the crucial developments of the 1940s and 1950s.²⁰⁷

In the standard translation of Khomeini's pivotal Ashura speech in 1963, found in Hamid Algar's *Islam and Revolution: Writings and Declarations of Imam Khomeini*, the concluding section, concerning the Baha'i Faith and Abdu'l-Baha (the son of the founder of the religion), is missing.²⁰⁸ This is a very curious omission, as it is the only theme of the speech that is edited out. This is not entirely Algar's fault, as the Baha'i elements are missing in the Persian source that Algar chose to use, although the complete version was available elsewhere.²⁰⁹ The concluding anti-Baha'i section is an extremely important part of this infamous speech, as Khomeini claims that it is Baha'ism that would cause the dissolution of the monarchy, since it would lead him to denounce the Shah as an unbeliever, and the Shah would be "finally got rid of" on this basis. There is no reason why this section would have been omitted, other than that it threatened the larger revolutionary narrative that Algar (and his source) were crafting, as Khomeini supporters. This erasure from the historical record speaks to the problematic positionality of the anti-Baha'i current in the movement for Islamic Iran. This "forgetting" of the importance of anti-Baha'ism was part of the cultural re-orientation involved in nationalizing the Islamic movement, as collective amnesia is the glue that holds nations together.

Nationalism involves the imagining of a political community that is "both inherently limited and sovereign."²¹⁰ The Islamic movement established the "limits" of the Iranian nation between 1941 and 1963, clearly equating it with the Shi'ites in Iran,

²⁰⁷ Khomeini, *Kauthar*, pp. 425-35 [January 1978].

²⁰⁸ Algar, *Islam and Revolution*, pp. 177-180.

²⁰⁹ Algar chose to use the shortened version of the speech found in *Khomeini and Jonbesh* (Tehran: Intisharat-i Davazdah-i Muharram, 1974), pp. 4-7.

²¹⁰ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, pp. 6-7.

with a space allowed for the “patriotic” and recognized minorities, and framing it in contradistinction to the Baha’is. This early movement did not, however, involve claims of sovereignty (with the possible exception of inconsistent bravado by the Feda’iyan-e Islam). It was not until 1963 that claims of sovereignty were first articulated, and it was not until 1964 that claims of sovereignty were articulated in a consistent way. According to Anderson, the articulation of sovereignty involves the rejection of the idea that rule should be “dynastic” and the belief that, instead, the nation should exercise political autonomy and self-determination. This was expressed openly for the first time in Khomeini’s opposition to the status-of-forces bill, when he denounced the Shah and the government as “traitors” in a false government. They were “dismissed” from representing the nation by Khomeini, who instead identifies the ulama as the authentic voice of the nation.²¹¹

²¹¹ Khomeini, *Kauthar*, pp. 225-33 [October 26, 1964].

CHAPTER IX

Conclusion

Nationalisms are not constructed quickly and their taken-for-granted origins rarely, if ever, withstand close historical observation. In the case of Shi'ite nationalism in Iran, I have tried to problematize the origins of this discourse, as expressed in the 1960s, most prominently by Khomeini, by treating it as a cultural artifact and attempting to untangle the earlier cultural productions that were re-oriented as part of this national discourse. I asked: why was it that the ulama were firmly in the royalist camp in the early 1950s, but largely opposed to the regime by 1963? Finding none of the standard explanations satisfactory, I engaged in a careful exploration of the institutional history and discursive currents of the Borujerdi period, and have framed the opposition of the early 1960s as the later stage of a decades-long process. Broadly speaking, there were three main stages to this development.

The first stage involved the imagining of Iran as a Shi'ite nation and the call for the state to reflect the values and enforce the limits of this nation. Important elements of this process included: the Islamic revival that followed the 1941 abdication of Reza Shah; a newly invigorated clergy, united the leadership of Borujerdi; the creation of numerous Islamic associations; British and American patronage of such groups as a bulwark against Communism; the establishment of an alternative Islamic press; the (partial) standardization, in this alternative press, of a discourse promoting the construct of a

Shi'ite nation; and the appeal for the state to reflect the values of this nation by reaffirming its Shi'ite orientation by weeding out the Baha'i "infiltration" that polluted and endangered it.

Anti-Baha'ism acted as a counter-melody to the movement for "Islamic Iran." As the diverse organizations and individuals involved in the Islamic movement pursued different priorities, and had different visions and understandings of what an Islamic Iran would be, anti-Baha'ism acted as a centripetal force holding together a movement that was united by little else. While Islamic Iran was a nebulous and distant utopia, the Baha'i "threat" presented an immediate, tangible soft target that could be attacked with impunity in order to make a larger point about the need to Islamicize the nation. When the Shah seized direct control in 1955, Borujerdi demanded a pogrom against the Baha'is as a boon for clerical support of the Shah in the 1953 coup that returned him to power, and threatened to expose and target the immorality of the royal family if he did not comply. The anti-Baha'i pogrom that followed, short-lived as it was, was nevertheless effective as an object lesson demonstrating Shi'ite territoriality, with the most prominent public marker of the existence of Baha'is in Iran removed from the sacred skyline of the capital.

Juergensmeyer and Friedland have argued that this kind of religious violence is a way of embodying the Durkheimian distinction between the sacred and the profane, of tangibly marking the line between us and Them as an incommensurate divide based on "absolute, non-negotiable differences."¹ In Iran, the violence against Baha'is and their property was intended to demonstrate this division by marking Baha'ism as irreconcilable with Iranian identity and beyond the limits of the Shi'ite nation. By "limits," I am

¹ Friedland, "Religious Nationalism," p. 139.

referring to Anderson's definition of nationalism, which involves the collective imagining of both the limits and sovereignty of the nation.² At this stage, the Islamic movement did not claim sovereignty, but was instead actively constructing the limits of the nation, both discursively and tangibly.

The second stage involved the permanent rupture between the state and the imagined Shi'ite nation as a result of British and American intervention, initially over the persecution of Baha'is, and the Shah's subsequent attempt to dominate and discipline the ulama, who were now marked as a threat to national order and an impediment to progress. The intervention to prevent the disaster of an imminent "holocaust" in "American Iran" was primarily to protect British and American interests in Iran, although there were clear humanitarian concerns as well, at least on the American side. As the initial danger passed, however, the intervention evolved into a larger policy reversal, as the combative ulama and Islamic movements that had been patronized to fight Communism were now seen as a security threat and a chronological drag on Iran, hindering its ability to carry out the reforms needed to counteract the appeal of the Left. The Shah, who had initially been praised for his liberalism and willingness to play the role of a constitutional monarch, was now seen to be too "weak," and was pressured to become a strong man like his father, with the disciplining of the clergy being the litmus test for his continued usefulness on the throne. The disciplining of the clergy began with the abortive ending of the anti-Baha'i pogrom and continued with the closing down of Islamic organizations, the imprisonment of anti-Baha'i activists, the inhumane conditions that they faced in exile to Bandar Abbas and elsewhere, the massacre of Shirazi's mob in June 1955, and the harsh and occasionally violent repression of religiosity at Moharram.

² See Chapter I.

In the late 1950s, these efforts expanded as the ad hoc efforts of General Bakhtiar were expanded and bureaucratized in the form of SAVAK, clerical resistance at Mashhad was stomped out, and Moharram came under the control of the state, with “cowed” clerics reading SAVAK-scripted sermons. Borujerdi, who in the early phase of the anti-Baha’i pogrom had praised the Shah and indicated that the Hidden Imam was pleased with him as well, was left full of “loathing for the system.” His optimism about the new Shah had turned to alienation and disgust, due to his betrayal, which was blamed on American pressure. As suppression of the ulama continued, the regime, the Americans, and the Baha’is became increasingly conflated and seen as intent on destroying the ulama.

The third stage involved the attempt to remove the financial basis of clerical autonomy through land reform and to further secularize Iran through the various “anti-Islamic” initiatives grouped with land reform. The Islamic movement felt compelled to resist and, eventually, to rhetorically dismiss the regime and claim symbolic sovereignty. Although Khomeini was the one to explicitly assert sovereignty in 1964, the ulama’s turn against the state began in 1959 when Borujerdi mobilized national clerical opposition to women’s enfranchisement and land reform, successfully blocked these reforms, and caused them to be set aside until after his death. Although Borujerdi considered these reforms to be anti-Islamic, his opposition was not against them specifically, but, rather, they pushed his patience past its breaking point, following several years of betrayals and anti-Islamic initiatives that, taken together, caused land reform to be seen as the climax of a larger attempt to weaken and destroy Islam in Iran.

When land reform was revived after Borujerdi’s death, in association with other “anti-Islamic” initiatives like the enfranchisement of women, and laws thought to allow

Baha'is onto local government councils, there was widespread opposition by the ulama and the Islamic organizations, who, like Borujerdi, saw these developments as simply a new stage of an anti-Islamic project that had been going on for several years. The difference was that, unlike 1959, clerical opposition was unsuccessful in blocking these reforms, for a number of reasons. Most important, was the Shah's insistence that the White Revolution was to be his crowning achievement, and the subsequent unacceptability of the loss of prestige that would result from a failure to follow through with his announced goals. When religious opposition continued, despite the passage of the White Revolution, the Shah—over-confident in his security regime—turned SAVAK loose on Qom and, when anger at this violence fueled further clerical opposition on Ashura, he arrested those responsible and turned the military loose on the massive crowds that protested, leading to a bloodbath.

This decisive display of public violence was able to suppress overt resistance, but it caused the regime to be marked as the irredeemable enemy of the movement for Islamic Iran. The violence of Moharram 1963 caused the Shah to be cast as “Yazid”—the killer of Imam Husayn, the Other of the Shi'ite nation—while the 1964 capitulations to the Americans led to the “dismissal” of his sovereignty and the claim that the leaders of the Islamic movement were the true representatives of the Shi'ite nation that constituted Iran. Although the Shah's public violence and capitulation to America triggered the articulation of Shi'ite sovereignty, this claim was predicated on the previous imagining of the nature and limits of the Islamic nation in Iran, a process that occurred over decades.

Dominance without hegemony, hegemony without dominance

Ranajit Guha has pointed out how imperialism can produce a historical paradox, as the world's foremost Western democracies create and sustain autocracies in other regions of the world under their control.³ He was referring to colonial India, but his points are also valid for Iran. In the United States, dominance is maintained through persuasion, rather than force, because of the hegemonic nature of the state. In Iran, the Shah ruled not through persuasion, but through coercion (increasingly so as his reign progressed). He was able to achieve dominance through the loyalty of the military and the transformation of Iran into a police state, but he never achieved hegemony.

In the Indian case, Guha points out that domination by foreigners was exchanged for domination by local elites, after the traditional cultural deference shown towards the upper castes was re-oriented for nationalist purposes and these local elites discursively imagined a nation, one in which they were its "natural" representatives. By mobilizing certain segments of the population with this discourse, Indian elites were able to achieve independence and sovereignty, but the nature and scope of their hegemony has been limited. It has largely ignored the segments of the population not appealed to by the initial nationalist mobilization, who were never really integrated into the nation that was imagined by the Indian nationalism of the elites.

A similar process occurred in Iran, with the ulama in the place of upper caste Hindus. They challenged imperial domination by creating an alternate hegemony, persuaded large segments of the Iranian population to mobilize under (or alongside) their banner, and eventually gained control of the state. After the Revolution, however, it

³ Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

became very clear that the clerics did not wield hegemonic power, and that the Revolution merely replaced one system of rule through domination with another system of rule through domination. It created a system perhaps even less hegemonic than that of the Pahlavis, given that the Islamic Republic has imprisoned and killed more political prisoners in its first decade than Mohammad Reza Shah did during his nearly four-decade reign.⁴

Although these later developments are beyond the scope of this study, I have made the extended comparison in order to point out that the early Shi'ite nationalist movement created an alternate hegemony that was useful for the purposes of mobilizing resistance, but which was ultimately unsuitable as the basis for creating a state that could be ruled through persuasion rather than domination.

The early Shi'ite nationalist movement used fear of the Baha'i Other and outrage over the corruption and the public violence of the Shah to mobilize a large segment of the population. Many of those who initially responded to this appeal were attracted by its populism. The Shi'ite nationalist movement was framed, at first, as rule by the people, i.e. rule by the Shi'ite masses instead of the "Baha'i" elite, and it did not initially involve the idea of clerical rule or theocracy. Such ideas are actually diametrically opposed to the *mardom*-centered discourse of the 1950s that I have discussed. The later desire to spread the revolution beyond Iran's borders is equally alien to the origin of the movement and its strict focus on Iran. As the dissonance between the actual nature of clerical rule and the

⁴ Under Khomeini, tens of thousands of political prisoners were executed in less than a decade. See: Ervand Abrahamian, *Tortured Confessions: Prisons and Public Recantation in Modern Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Reza Afshari, *Human Rights in Iran: Abuse of Cultural Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001); and Darius Rejali, (1994). *Torture and Modernity: Self, Society, and State in Modern Iran* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1994).

initial populism of the Islamic mobilization became more apparent over time, it became increasingly clear that the Islamic Republic could not rule through persuasion alone.

These discrepancies between the movement's early populism and later theocracy can be explained by separating Khomeini from the movement that he inherited. Like Kashani, Khomeini was a transnational pan-Islamist (in the tradition of al-Afghani) who patronized a religious nationalist movement whose core values he did not share. As discussed in Chapter II, Kashani was often mistaken for a Shi'ite nationalist because he co-opted the language of his clients, the Fedaiyan-e Islam, although close analysis of his own ideas reveals that he was actually a pan-Islamist and did not share the beliefs of the movement that he patronized or those of the audience to whom he sometimes crafted his rhetoric. Khomeini was the same. He highlighted points of agreement with his audience while de-emphasizing or obscuring the ways in which his worldview differed radically. Whereas the early Islamic movement, coming out of the lay organizations, stressed the centrality of the *mardom* (i.e. Shi'ite citizenry) and the peripheral role of the clergy, Khomeini was always a strong supporter of the ulama as an institution and an advocate of the preeminent role it must play in leading the people. Nevertheless, he deemphasized this at first and instead appealed to the Islamic populism of the Islamic movement that he sought to lead. In so doing, he advanced clericalism through the gift horse of populism.

The Shi'ite nation and historical amnesia

The catalytic role played by the Baha'is in the movement for "Islamic Iran" is comparable to the role that "the daughters of Quchan" played in encouraging the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911). In this episode, immortalized in Najmabadi's

work, Iranian girls near Iran's eastern border were being taken by foreign raiders. This led to a national sense of shame and weakness and to the idea that something must be done to ensure that the Shah defends the interests of the people. This sentiment often led to support for the constitutional movement in Iran. Despite the strong emotions over Iran's lost daughters, the constant evocation of this issue, and the clear importance of this thread of constitutional history, it was essentially ignored in all major treatments of the constitutional revolution. In her intervention, Najmabadi attributes this effacement to ideological historiography and its use of grand narratives that cannot accept episodes like this, which threaten the foundational premises on which their ideology rests. She notes:

the more prominent the story, the more it may become necessary to ignore it... It is precisely the overwhelming presence of the story of the daughters of Quchan that may account for its disappearance from Adamiyyat's history. Had it been a brief episode... Adamiyyat could have allowed it to enter his story for a brief moment then leave the scene. The story would not have threatened to take over the grand narrative of his history and occupy the overall meaning of the revolution.⁵

As discussed in Chapter VIII, many of the most important discursive currents of the Borujerdi period, like anti-Baha'i populism, were later forgotten as the Shi'ite nationalist myth was slowly reified in the 1960s and thereafter. Whereas, in the Borujerdi period, the Shi'ite nature of Iran was a matter of contestation, and Iran was feared to be in danger of reorienting itself to Baha'ism, with the development of Shi'ite nationalism this earlier contestation is consciously forgotten and it is taken as a given that the nation is, was, and always will be Shi'ite. The arena of contestation was moved from the orientation of the nation to the need for the nation to assert its sovereignty vis-à-vis the "false" government of the Pahlavis.

⁵ Najmabadi, *The Story of the Daughters of Quchan*, pp. 179-80.

Iranian Shi'ite nationalism, like all nationalisms, necessarily needs to deny that it has been historically produced. This is to be expected, as nationalism involves the purposeful forgetting of beginnings to reach certain ends. History is the enemy of this process since, as Renan notes, "forgetting and even the historical error are an essential factor of the formation of a nation."⁶ Despite the ubiquitous nature of anti-Baha'ism and its rhetorical importance in the creation of the Islamic movement, this importance could not be acknowledged, and its history could only be remembered in ways that served the larger needs of a teleological revolutionary narrative.

Given nationalism's universal need to deny and obscure its true origins, it is very telling that, until recently, Baha'is have existed in the blind spot of Iranian historiography. Algar's (deliberate?) omission of Baha'i references from Khomeini's infamous speech of Ashura 1963 speaks to the importance of the anti-Baha'i current in the construction of Shi'ite nationalism, for a nation is defined not by what it collectively remembers, but what it collectively forgets. The turn against the Hojjiyeh in the early 1980s also demonstrates the need of Iranian Shi'ite nationalism to hide its historical origins.⁷ In the midst of a bloody war with Iraq and bitter infighting over who would control the Revolution, why was the most apolitical and harmless Shi'ite organization targeted and seen as a threat? The Hojjiyeh's threat was not to the state, but to its founding myths.

Likewise, the continued presence of a few hundred thousand Baha'is in Iran after the Revolution has been considered, and is still considered, by the Islamic Republic to be a serious threat to Iran, despite the non-violent nature of the community and its

⁶ van der Veer, *Religious Nationalism*, p. 193.

⁷ See: Vali and Zubaida, "Factionalism and Political Discourse in the Islamic Republic of Iran."

impoverishment after the Revolution. Since 1979, hundreds of Baha'is have been killed, thousands imprisoned, and tens of thousands forced to flee Iran as refugees.⁸ This did not occur because they were a threat to Iran's security, but because they are an existential threat.

Iranian Shi'ite nationalism was initially imagined in opposition to the Otherness of the Baha'i community. As such, any move to integrate the Baha'is threatens the reified limits of the nation. In recent years, such challenges have been occurring, as prominent non-Baha'i Iranians have increasingly expressed public support for the citizenship rights of Baha'is, leading to a small, but significant discursive shift in the understanding of Iranian identity.⁹ Several threads of the opposition movement are presently imagining an alternate hegemony in which even the Baha'is can be reconciled within the limits of the Iranian nation. Nothing may come of this, of course, but it speaks to the ongoing contestation over the boundaries and orientation of the Iranian nation.

⁸ For the situation of Baha'is in Iran after 1979, see Cole "The Baha'i Minority;" Afshar, "Human Rights Violations of Iranian Baha'is;" and Cooper, *The Baha'is of Iran*.

⁹ In 2008, Grand Ayatollah Montazeri, who had worked with Borujerdi to stamp out Baha'ism as a young man, expressed the legal opinion that although Baha'is were not a recognized minority, and he did not approve of them, "they are the citizens of this country, they have the right of citizenship and to live in this country. Furthermore, they must benefit from the Islamic compassion which is stressed in the Quran and by the religious authorities" (<http://www.mideastyouth.com/2008/05/22/ayatollah-montazeri-proclaims-bahais-citizens-of-iran/>). The following year, in a petition entitled "We Are Ashamed," distributed in early 2009, hundreds of prominent Iranians expressed solidarity with the plight of Iranian Baha'is and shame at their (collective) silence over the treatment of Baha'is in Iran (<http://www.iranian.com/main/2009/feb/we-are-ashamed>). In an open letter released in March of the same year, many of the most prominent scholars involved in Iranian Studies called for an end to human rights abuses against Baha'is in Iran (<http://iran.bahai.us/2009/03/11/call-by-academics-to-stop-the-persecution-of-the-bahais-in-iran/>). Later in 2009, author Azar Nafisi and actress Shohreh Aghdashloo spoke out for Iranian Baha'is (<http://www.dcbahai.org/news-and-events/74-iranevent09>). More recently, Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi has stood against the persecution of Iranian Baha'is and defended the Yaran (the Baha'i administrative council for Iran), who were recently sentenced to twenty years imprisonment, supposedly for spying and other invented crimes. Interestingly, charges against the Baha'i leaders were expanded following the 2009 election debacle, after the government claimed that the Baha'is were the masterminds of the opposition protests. This claim is nonsense, but it suggests that the present regime, like that of the Shah, finds it impossible to fully acknowledge the grievances of the people, instead blaming "foreign" elements for widespread anti-regime sentiments. By discursively shunting the opposition movement beyond the limits of the nation, into the realm of the Baha'is, the regime is actually exposing the artificial nature of this binary, and the ease with which it can be reformulated.

Appendix I

The Number of Baha'is in Iran in the 1950s

The number of Baha'is in Iran during the mid-Pahlavi period is largely a matter of speculation. As one American report puts it, the number varies from 50,000 to 500,000 depending on which group you ask.¹ This actually understates the problem. The number of Baha'is in Iran varies from 0.0001% to 5% of the population, depending on which source one privileges. I suggest that about 1.5% of the population (i.e. 250,000) was Baha'i in 1955.

The Iranian government claimed publicly in 1955 that there were “no Baha'is” in Iran.² At a different point in the same year, it claimed that there were only two thousand Baha'is in Iran.³ In the same year, Falsafi claimed that there were a million Baha'is in Iran, while an anti-Baha'i editor at *Tufan* openly ridiculed this figure and claimed that there were only 20,000 Baha'is in Iran.⁴ Again in the same year, Western media sources reported 500,000 to 700,000 Baha'is in Iran.⁵

In the 1950s, Baha'is made inconsistent claims about their membership. Most lobbying efforts by American Baha'is involved the repetition of the numbers used by

¹ NACPM, RG 263 / 290 / 4 / 31 / 5 / Box 165, Iran – Religion, Education, and Public Information, 1964.

² Fischer, *Iran*, p. 187.

³ This figure was claimed publicly by the Iranian government to downplay the importance of Baha'i persecutions. Its author later described this figure as fabricated. See: TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 31 / 55, FO to Chancery, June 20, 1955; FO 248 / 1560 / 1786 / 44 / 55, Confidential Minutes by Wright, August 24, 1955.

⁴ USDS, *Iraq, 1955-1959*, Reel 15: 150; *The New York Times*, May 24, 1955.

⁵ *The New York Times*, May 24, 1955 [500,000]; *The Times*, May 18, 1955 [700,000].

Falsafi or in press reports. The British N.S.A., however, rejected Falsafi's claim and said that the true figure was in the hundreds of thousands, between the government's figure of 2000 and Falsafi's claim of one million.⁶ In 1957, however, the same institution claimed that there were a million Baha'is in Iran.⁷

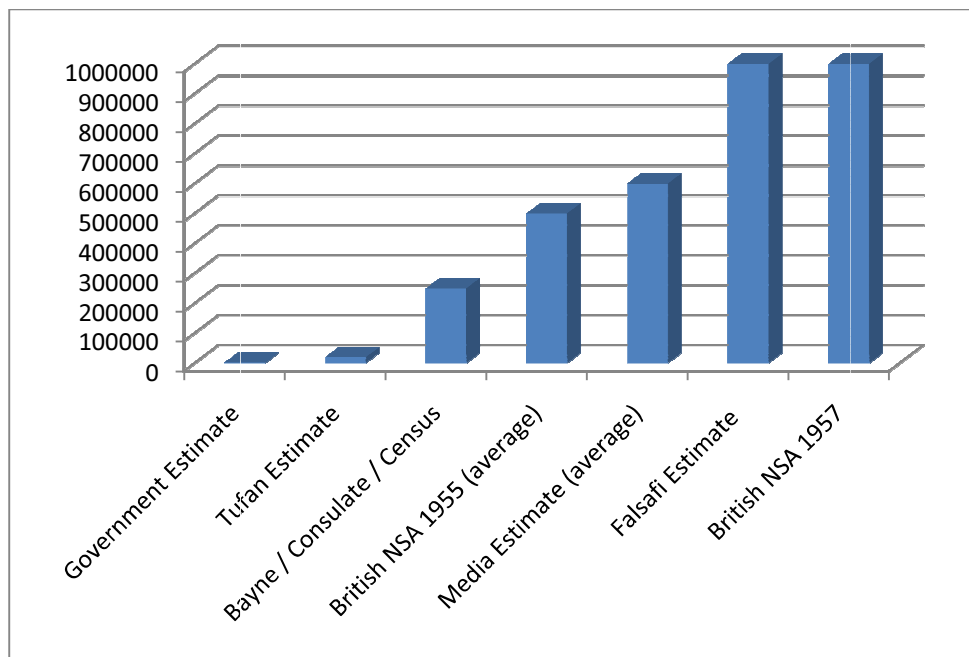


Table 10.1. Conflicting estimates of the number of Baha'is in Iran

Bayne's 1955 investigative report—drawing on informed Baha'i sources within Iran—places the number of adherents at between 200,000 and 300,000 or about 1 to 1.5% of the population (of twenty million).⁸ This is also supported by information obtained by American consulates for the areas under their jurisdiction, which identified similar Baha'i

⁶ *The New York Times*, May 24, 1955.

⁷ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 127139 / P1781 / 1, Chancery to FO, January 17, 1957.

⁸ Bayne notes that Baha'i informants claimed 300,000 members in 1955, but he felt that 200,000 was more likely, because of his unwillingness to count less active members.

percentages (approximately 1%).⁹ This percentage is also supported by the Tehran results from the 1956 census, in which 1.4% claimed “other” or gave inadmissible answers (there was, of course, no “Baha’i” category).¹⁰

In Bayne’s view, the true size of the Baha’i community was obscured by the Baha’is themselves for reasons of expediency. He points out that the official Baha’i records, which were left for the government (when Baha’i properties were seized in 1955), seem to have been deliberately misleading, presumably out of self-protection, given the “Holocaust” that the community feared. In Qazvin, for example, the seized records claimed that there were only fifteen Baha’is, but this was contradicted by other evidence, such as an annual local budget of \$20,000 and assets including a ten-bed hostel. On the other hand, when it was advantageous, Bayne felt that Baha’is would inflate their numbers by including many who were only loosely associated with the religion, sometimes even counting among their number those who had merely accepted Baha’i literature. The issue of “real” membership was further complicated by occasional “purges” in which “backsliders are asked to resign,” as occurred in the early 1950s as part of the preparation for the global Ten Year Crusade.¹¹

⁹ See, for example, USDS, *Iran, 1955-1959*, Reel 2:175.

¹⁰ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 133061 / EP 1821 / 3, “National Census of Iran 1956: data collected for Tehran city.”

¹¹ Bayne, “Baha’is Again,” p. 7; and “We Are Losing Heart,” p. 3.

Appendix II

Religion and Nation under Reza Shah

The Pahlavi “dynasty” controlled Iran from 1925-79 and consisted of Reza Shah (r. 1925-41) and his son Mohammad Reza Shah (r. 1941-79). Unlike the earlier Safavid (1501-1736) and Qajar (1794-1925) dynasties, the Pahlavis did not seize power with the backing of Turkic tribes, and did not justify their rule in religious terms.¹ Instead, Reza Khan, the leader of the Persian Cossack Brigade, came to power through a 1921 military coup (with British support) that occurred at a time when Iran lacked a functional central government and faced a number of regional insurgencies.² As he consolidated power, he originally wanted to transform Iran into a republic, following the Turkish model. When the ulama strongly objected, he agreed to the continuation of the monarchy, taking the throne in 1925.³ He ruled Iran for an additional sixteen years until Iran was occupied by Allied forces in 1941 and he was forced to abdicate in favor of his son.

¹ For the Safavid period, see: Roger Savory, *Iran under the Safavids* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Kathryn Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs and Messiahs: Cultural Landscapes of Early Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Rula Abisaab, *Converting Persia: Religion and Power in the Safavid Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004); and Sussan Babaie et al, *Slaves of the Shah: New Elites of Safavid Iran* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2004). For the Qajar period, see: Robert Gleave, *Religion and Society in Qajar Iran* (London: Routledge, 2005); Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*; Mangol Bayat, *Iran's First Revolution: Shi'ism and the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1909* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) and *Mysticism and Dissent: Socioreligious Thought in Qajar Iran* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1982); Janet Afary, *The Iranian Constitutional Revolution, 1906-1911: Grassroots Democracy, Social Democracy, and the Origins of Feminism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); and Nikki Keddie, *Qajar Iran and the Rise of Reza Khan 1796-1925* (Costa Mesa: Mazda, 1999).

² Abrahamian, *Iran between Two Revolutions*, pp. 102-18.

³ Keddie, *Modern Iran*, pp. 85-86.

During the sixteen years of his reign, Reza Shah engaged in two main national initiatives. The first was the “modernization” of Iran—in the material, administrative, educational, and industrial sense—which most scholars consider to have been moderately successful, albeit with a number of caveats and the problematization of the categories and assumptions involved in such a project.⁴ The second national project, which is the one that concerns us, is the secularization or de-Islamicization of Iran, which is universally considered to have been superficial and ephemeral.⁵ The most commonly discussed aspects of this campaign are the attempt to force Muslim women to discard *hijab* (Islamic dress) and the violent clash between the clergy and the Shah over his anti-Islamic policies, which culminated in a bloody confrontation in Mashhad in 1935. On this occasion, the protestors—who had sought refuge in the Imam Reza Shrine—were crushed by the Shah’s security forces. By exercising his famous “iron fist,” Reza Shah was able to suppress clerical opposition and force superficial acceptance of a number of policies that were thought to be anti-Islamic. After his abdication in 1941, most “anti-Islamic” cultural restrictions fell away, however, and there was even a move in the other direction, as Iran experienced a powerful Islamic revival in the 1940s.⁶

Although I agree that these efforts negatively impacted Muslims, and that this attempt to suppress Islamic religiosity was superficial, I propose that framing the entirety of this campaign as “anti-Islamic” misses its larger purpose and significance as an attempt to imagine Iran as nation, and to formulate and promulgate policies that sought to

⁴ See, for example, Amin Banani, *The Modernization of Iran* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1961), Stephanie Cronin, *The Making of Modern Iran: State and Society under Riza Shah, 1921-1941* (London: Routledge Curzon, 2003); and Donald Wilber, *Riza Shah Pahlavi: The Resurrection and Reconstruction of Iran 1878-1944* (Hicksville, N.Y.: Exposition Press, 1975).

⁵ See, for example, Akhavi, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Iran*, xv-xvi.

⁶ See Chapter II.

create a national self through habitus.⁷ That is to say, Reza Shah believed that Iran was a state without a nation, so he intended to produce this nation through the coerced behavior of its citizens. This new structure would be internalized until it was taken as natural, the artificiality forgotten. These embodied national dispositions would then be externalized and projected outwards.

This process was sidetracked by the anti-clericalism and racial nationalism that came to be discursively linked to this re-imagining of Iran. Strong clerical opposition to dress reform also caused the issue to be further diverted from its unifying intentions, as it was taken up as a rallying cry for anti-regime agitation. As part of the authority struggle that followed, the governmental discourse escalated its portrayal of Shi'ism as a marked category, representing the inverse of the Iranian national self. The ulama came to be increasingly treated, at an official level, as Iran's internal Other, who were unpatriotic, "foreign," and the scapegoats for all of Iran's social ills and continued "backwardness." The following sections explore this marking of Shi'ism as alien from Iran's national self.

The Ulama and progress

After Reza Shah took the throne in 1925, he constantly shared his opinion that the ulama were, at best, the "barrier" to Iran's development into a modern state and, at worst, the

⁷ Bourdieu claims that beliefs are socialized into culture over time until they are naturalized to the point that their origins are forgotten and they become part of social structures. The habitus is a system of dispositions that both produces and is produced, with external structures becoming internalized and naturalized, through practice, and internal dispositions also becoming externalized, through practice. See: Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977) and *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984). This goal is somewhat alluded to in a 1931 discussion of the Shah's attempt to create a national disposition. In his dissertation, Siasi (a frequent member of Cabinet) claims that the attempt to reform dress "rests on the principle of the reciprocal influence of the physical and the moral. The national Persian costume, constantly worn by a tribal man, in a distant region, will give him the sentiment of belonging to a vast national unit and not to a particularist clan. Also, this common trait, precisely because it is superficial and visible, will bring together the different groups of Persians." A. Akbar Siasi, *La Perse au Contact de l'Occident: Etude Historique et Sociale* (Paris: Librairie Ernest Leroux, 1931), pp. 203-06.

“major culprit in keeping Iran backwards.”⁸ Reza Shah was “known to believe that it was the mollahs who for centuries kept the people illiterate and ignorant, and who even today—if they dared—would try and block all social advancement.”⁹ This sort of anti-religious attitude was common among many segments of the Iranian elite at the time, and should be thought of a contemporary milieu rather than a peculiar characteristic of the Shah. His Minister of Court, Taymurtash, for example, criticized American support of missionaries being sent to Iran by asking: “how we would like it if they bundled up a crowd of moth-eaten mullas and sent them to America to open schools.”¹⁰ Such attitudes were also regularly displayed in the press. *Rastakhiz*, for example, claimed in 1922 that “the corruption existing in Iran is entirely the fault of the clergy” and that, in dealing with them, “absolute and final steps must be taken.”¹¹ The same paper editorialized, right before the coronation of Reza Shah, that

The root of our evil is not insecurity; it is the class of the clergy. If this root is not attacked soon, all the gains of the army and the army itself will vanish. The best method of eradicating the clergy is to take away their means of livelihood. The waqf [endowment] lands should be taken away and sold to poor peasants.¹²

It is important to differentiate between the anti-clericalism of this class of Western-educated intellectuals, typically grounded in positivism and Orientalism, and Reza Shah’s personal dislike for the ulama, which was less intellectual and instead amounted to an almost visceral reaction against them, largely rooted in his own insecurity. At a celebration in Urmia in 1927, for example, Reza Shah was, to his visible

⁸ NACPM, NFAC (CIA), “Islam in Iran: A Research Paper,” August 31, 1979, p. 6.

⁹ Ibid., RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 16 / 4 / Box 15 / 840.5 Social Matters – Manners and Customs, January 21, 1937.

¹⁰ Ibid., NFAC (CIA), “Islam in Iran,” p. 6.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid. Such a program of land reform was eventually initiated by the second Pahlavi shah in the 1960s, also under the influence of an anti-clerical entourage who guided the monarch’s grand, but vague, intentions.

displeasure, surrounded by many clerics. One of them, Hajji Mirza Fath Ali came before him and insisted on praying for his success and kindly informed the Shah how and when he was to participate in the blessing. The Shah angrily refused, saying that participation in these clerical shows was “no part of his business.” The cleric, afraid of losing face, insisted and said that he would pray that all Iranians be obedient to the Shah. The Shah, his anger growing, replied, “Damn your prayers. I’ll burn them if they aren’t.” When the cleric continued to insist, the Shah grew very angry and spit out, “*pedar sukhta!*” (“Your father burns in hell!”) and left the celebration, ordering that the cleric be punished. Thereupon, Mirza Fath Ali, “in great fear and distress,” took *bast* (refuge) at the house of a prominent local merchant, but was soon found dead, after having “fallen.”¹³

Reza Shah and the imposter complex

The Shah’s animosity towards the clergy was generally not the result of a reasoned stance, but rather an emotional reaction to those who had embarrassed and frustrated him in the past and who represented potential sources of future criticism, especially about the legitimacy of his rule. Despite his palaces and wealth, he was haunted by an imposter complex. His rough exterior and reputation as a bully were largely cultivated in order to mask his anxiety over being “found out” and removed from his life of luxury. This fear ran so deep that the Shah—who slept on the ground rather than getting used to the beds in his palaces—would sleep uneasily, gun in hand, and wake up in terror, grabbing his weapon out of reflex. This anxiety was only heightened by his growing addictions to araq (alcohol from aniseed) and opium. He began to be suspicious of anyone he believed was smarter than he was, or who knew what he did not, and tended to feel safer and more

¹³ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1384, Tabriz Consulate to Tehran, September 27, 1927.

at ease around individuals that he considered to be less knowledgeable and capable than himself.¹⁴

Reza Shah was notorious for his “explosive, Cossack temper,” through which he “battered his way to the throne.” It was reported that, “he was known to slay dogs that dared bark in his presence, to hurl offending subordinates bodily through windows and to string up enemies by their heels and kick in their teeth.”¹⁵ In most cases, however, his episodes of violence were not random but were instead triggered by incidents in which he felt threatened, embarrassed, or feared his lack of education and sophistication would be exposed. His famous bursts of anger were actually primarily defensive.

This obsession with gloss can be seen in the Shah’s anxious concern over his image in the press, both at home and abroad, and with cultivating an image that would reflect positively on him personally. The mainstream Iranian press, which served as semi-official mouthpieces of the Shah, was used to promote a positive public image, with criticism attacked as unpatriotic. In an editorial in *Ettela’at*, for example, foreigners are attacked for taking pictures of “nonsense” and peasants instead of focusing exclusively on photographing the new and magnificent things in Iran. Its author speculates that this behavior must have been done to supply unflattering pictures of Iran to the foreign press and thereby embarrass or misrepresent Iran as being less than modern.¹⁶ This hypersensitivity to criticism had, for some time before, been a topic of diplomatic concern. One such American analysis predicts that

The Iranian Government will probably discover—though perhaps when it is too late—that not even the most alluring material benefits can in the long run

¹⁴ Ibid., FO 371 / 13783, Personalities report, January 23, 1929.

¹⁵ Anderson and Whitten, “CIA Study Finds Shah Insecure,” *Washington Post*, July 11, 1975.

¹⁶ *Ettela’at*, 14 Dey 1319 [January 4, 1941].

compensate a people for the loss of their freedom of speech and opinion... [T]here is practically no touch between the Government and the governed... [and] the most grotesque notions can be indulged in by the Government without risk of criticism or ridicule.¹⁷

This defensive attitude was not a development of the latter period of his rule, but can be seen just as clearly in the 1920s. In 1929, for example, when a merchant was so bold as to criticize his harmful policies, the Shah replied that, if he was not too busy to be bothered, he would replace the criticisms in his mouth with lead from his gun.¹⁸

Whenever attention was drawn to the underside of Iran's myth of boundless progress, or to the Shah's own personal failings, the response was predictable, disproportionate rage. In 1936, for example, the Shah recalled his foreign envoy in a huff over bad coverage in the foreign press. In the following year, the Shah withdrew his representative in France to protest critical articles; he also forced an apology. He had similar "tantrums" over mentions of the former dynasty in the foreign press, and over indirect accusations that he was a drunk. Likewise, after he was embarrassed when one of his representatives in Washington was publicly arrested for speeding, Reza Shah responded by closing his embassies and consulates in America.¹⁹

This pattern of behavior was rooted in his deep insecurity. All of the incidents in the press that he reacted most strongly to shared the fact that they were true. Within Iran, when his ignorance was exposed (as with Mirza Fath Ali having to explain religious formalities to him) or he was confronted with difficult truths (such as the complaints of the merchants) he chose to either ignore what he did not wish to see, or have the problem expunged. The assessment of foreigners, however, cut deeper because not only did he

¹⁷ NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 16 / 4 / Box 17, 891 – "Press of Tehran," August 3, 1937.

¹⁸ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 13781, Tehran to FO, January 7, 1929.

¹⁹ NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 16 / 4 / Box 4, March 31, 1936; Box 12, 701 – January 21, 1937, and February 1, 1938.

have a higher regard for foreign opinion, but because he had no control over it and all he could do was lash out diplomatically in ways that proved less than effective.

The Europeanization of dress is also related to this insecurity and fear of embarrassment. Reza Shah explained his choice of European headwear by saying, “Previously those who wore it thought that this head-gear conferred on them superiority over those who weren’t wearing it. We do not want those others to think that they are superior to us because of a minor difference in head covering.” He further explained that he “wanted Iranians to become like everybody else so that they would not be made fun of.”²⁰

The empire’s new clothes

Although other achievements, such as a national rail system, may be brought up when discussing Reza Shah’s legacy, the prohibition of Islamic dress is the issue that is inevitably raised and discussed while treating this period of Iranian history.²¹ Part of this is, no doubt, the product of an Orientalist fetishization of the veil, but there is more to it than that. Later clerical references to Reza Shah also fixate on his clothing policies, even more so than Western sources, although obviously for different reasons and with anger and emotion rather than admiration or detached criticism.²² The focus on dress reform is

²⁰ Wilber, *Riza Shah*, p. 166; Houshang Chehabi, “Staging the Emperor’s New Clothes: Dress Codes and Nation Building under Reza Shah,” *Iranian Studies* vol. 26 (Summer/Fall 1993): p. 226.

²¹ Chehabi refers to Reza Shah’s problematization of dress as “one of the most enduring legacies” of his reign and “the most unpopular of all his reforms.” He also notes that dress reform policies “were mainly meant to promote nation-building.” See: Chehabi, “Staging the Emperor’s New Clothes,” pp. 209, 217.

²² Later clerical recollections show little concern with male dress reform and, instead, emotionally recall the removal of the veil and link this action against Muslim women to the violence done to Muslim men who were killed protesting Reza Shah. See, for example, Khomeini’s angry discussion of this issue in his speeches on May 27, 1979 and November 5, 1979. In his September 10, 1980 speech, Khomeini explicitly equates the forced unveiling of Muslim women with the massacre of Muslim men in the 1935 massacre in Mashhad.

also justified on other grounds. Although reforms in education, infrastructure and other areas were less ephemeral, they were also less ambitious, less daunting, and less personal for Reza Shah. Nothing else he attempted required as much time, produced as much opposition, or commanded more media attention. It was truly his defining project.

In the first few years of his reign, Reza Shah became involved in an already-existing movement that sought to do away with turbans and veils.²³ As a result, he was known to, at receptions, urge his subjects to abandon traditional clothing and to modernize their dress. Dress nationalization began to be pushed more formally in 1927 and 1928, with the gradual removal of the turban and other forms of traditional male dress (with a few allowed exceptions) and their replacement with a round, peaked cap (later dubbed the *kolah-e Pahlavi*, or “Pahlavi cap”) accompanied by a short coat.²⁴

Those who violated the new dress code faced penalties ranging from fines to imprisonment. The policy was introduced softly at first, with policemen roaming the cities and “inviting” people to make the change, reserving violence for those who offered persistent resistance. This strategy was very successful, with significant opposition only in Shiraz, Tabriz, from the Kurds, and from Arab tribes on the southern border area between Iraq and Iran. These Arab tribes staged an unsuccessful revolt (which was about conscription and taxation in addition to the removal of traditional headwear) that was put down bloodily. As enforcement intensified, the Shah forbid turbaned individuals from his receptions. When “one well-known turbaned demagogue” insisted on his right to

²³ Chehabi, “Staging the Emperor's New Clothes,” p. 210-12. For veiling and the early women’s movement in Iran, see: Farzaneh Milani, *Veils and Words: The Emerging Voices of Iranian Women Writers* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1992); Afsaneh Najmabadi, “Veiled Discourse-Unveiled Bodies,” *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (Autumn, 1993): pp. 487-518; and Eliz Sanasarian, *The Women's Rights Movement in Iran: Mutiny, Appeasement and Repression from 1900 to Khomeini* (New York: Praeger, 1982).

²⁴ Chehabi, “Staging the Emperor's New Clothes,” pp. 213-214; TNAPRO, FO 371 / 13781.

wear it, he was sent to jail until he changed his mind. After a day he emerged sporting his Pahlavi cap.²⁵

The main objection raised by Muslims was that the new cap was deliberately antagonistic towards them, in that its peak made it impossible to touch the forehead to the ground during Islam's obligatory daily prayers. This obstacle was easily overcome by simply turning the hat backwards during prayers, but the issue was not so much the inconvenience as it was that the peak served no purpose other than to frustrate and inconvenience the devout. Because of the need to turn the cap to pray, one was forced to remember both Reza Shah as well as God while responding to the call to prayer.

The less devout saw the peaked cap as military in appearance, understood it to be the result of the Shah's military background, and believed that his aim was to marshal the nation as he had his soldiers. Others saw it as more like a school uniform, with the Shah as the edifying, but terrifying, headmaster. It was said that "the Shah's presence... exercised a depressing influence... rather like the presence of a severe schoolmaster on a class of young schoolboys."²⁶

In any case, the turban and other items of religious headwear were not universally proscribed. There was an exhaustive list of exceptions, including exceptions for *mojtaheds* (jurists recognized as able to make independent legal rulings), religious students who could pass an exam, village preachers who could pass an exam, Sunni jurists, certain types of preachers, teachers of theology or jurisprudence, non-Muslim priests, and a number of other religious positions—as long as verification was provided.

²⁵ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 13781, Tehran to FO, January 22, 1929.

²⁶ Ibid.

Senior clerics were somewhat upset that preachers lacking formal training would be unable to wear turbans, but were more upset by the requirement that legitimacy had to be officially demonstrated to the satisfaction of the state.²⁷ The way in which this authentication was achieved—insistence on exams, licenses, and other form of state-sanctioned proofs and tests—was the real problem for the ulama, since it pulled them under the sphere of governmental control, regulation, and legitimization. This was seen as a usurpation of clerical authority. Previously, a turban was a sign of authority, while now one had to appeal to the authorities in order to wear a turban.

Even though it was initially conceived in much broader terms, the campaign for national dress was reduced to the “Westernization” or “de-Islamicization” of dress. While it is true that there was an attempt to emulate Europe, and it is certainly true that the government’s most vitriolic contempt was reserved for the turbaned or veiled who failed to comply with the new national dress, this framing obscures the full scope of the project. Dress reform was, at least initially, largely about taking the disparate and divided parts of Iran, united by common borders and a common ruler, and transforming them into a somewhat homogenized mass in which differences of region, religion, and ethnicity would become more obscured. A shared national dress was to have served as the first step to creating a united national identity.

This attempt at national homogenization occurred in a society that was divided along ethno-linguistic lines, and in which communalism was deeply ingrained and habitually enforced. Under the previous dynasty, Jews and Zoroastrians were expected to

²⁷ This also had the effect of clearly bounding who was and who was not a cleric. Whereas in earlier periods boundaries were more porous, with individuals splitting their priorities between religion, business and other pursuits, the new law and the paperwork involved in wearing the clothing of the clergy was too burdensome for those who only partially identified themselves in this way. See: Chehabi, “Staging the Emperor’s New Clothes,” p.221.

wear distinctive dress, and this embodiment of distinction was used to prevent the occurrence of various taboos, such as having a non-Muslim build a house higher than his Muslim neighbors, or ride while a Muslim walked, or other objectionable public acts. Restrictions such as these rested on the idea that one could tell a Muslim from a non-Muslim based on appearance alone. For, “before the advent of Western clothing a man’s religious status, as well as his social class and often his profession, were proclaimed by the clothes he wore.”²⁸

Many of these restrictions were based on the belief that certain forms of contact with non-believers would lead to impurity, which would then need to be ritually removed. It is in this context that Baha’is caused particular anxiety, in that they not only generally had Muslim backgrounds and traditionally Muslim names, but were also generally indistinguishable from Muslim Iranians in terms of their dress and physical appearance.²⁹ This paranoia about the presence of an undetected, impure Other within the Muslim community was also directed at Jews who had converted into Islam under duress (the *Jadid al-Islam*, or “new Muslims”), who were, to outer appearances, Muslim, but who were feared (with some degree of truth) to be crypto-Jews.³⁰

With Reza Shah’s push for a new, national dress and concomitant reforms—such as integrating the Jewish population by attempting to end their ghettoization in their own quarter of the capital, and allowing non-Muslims to advance to very high positions in the army and civil service—there was an expansion of the paranoid fear that the Muslim community would be infiltrated by what was perceived as insidious cuckoos. Over

²⁸ NACPM, NFAC (CIA), “Islam in Iran,” p. 43.

²⁹ Sanasarian, “The Comparative Dimension,” p. 163.

³⁰ See: Hilda Nissimi, “Memory, Community, and the Mashhadi Jews During the Underground Period,” *Jewish Social Studies*, Vol. 9, No. 3 (Spring - Summer, 2003): pp. 76-106.

decades, this fear of communal exposure to infiltration by individuals whose outer shell seemed Muslim while their inner identity was that of an “other,” would be slowly conflated with a fear of national infiltration by those who seemed and claimed to be Iranian but who, within this husk, were really foreign.³¹

For Reza Shah, the embodiment, via dress, of the nation’s divided religious, linguistic, and ethnic ascribed identities was a serious barrier to creating a shared national identity. In the military, this problem was addressed by removing all of these markers before the transformation from recruit to soldier could begin. In a sense, the particulars of the new, homogenized uniform are somewhat arbitrary and immaterial. The color and the shape of the uniform, for example, are only really important in that they symbolize difference vis-à-vis rival bodies.³² By creating a national dress, Reza Shah was actually defining what it meant to be Persian in a way that was independent of traditional ascribed identities. The homogenization of dress did not just affect clerics and *hijab*-minded women. Jews that had been forced to identify their religion through their traditional clothing were now able to more easily integrate socially and economically. Ethnic minorities like Arabs, Azeris, and Kurds, not to mention the large tribal population, all had to (at least theoretically) abandon some of the items of clothing that proclaimed their ethnic identity. As mentioned above, it was Arabic-speaking Iranians in the south who were the ones who initially revolted over replacing their ethnic headwear with the Pahlavi cap. Their revolt over the loss of this symbol of ethnicity was far bloodier than Muslim agitation over the loss of turbans.

³¹ See Chapter III.

³² See, for example, Nathan Joseph and Nicholas Alex. “The Uniform: A Sociological Perspective,” *American Journal of Sociology* vol. 77, no. 4 (1972): pp. 719-730; and Anat Rafaeli and Michael Pratt, “Tailored Meaning: On the Meaning and Impact of Organizational Dress,” *Academy of Management Review* vol. 18, no. 1 (1993): pp. 32-55.

The idea that the new national dress was a form of national rebirth, as an integrated whole, was reflected in the choice of *naw-ruz* (New Year in the Persianate world) as the date on which the 1929 dress laws would take effect.³³ The choice of *naw-ruz*, which is more of a period than a single day in Iran, is significant in that it invokes a sense of liminality and involves the ritualized shedding of the old in preparation for accepting a new, elevated state. This ritualized cleansing at *naw-ruz* is perhaps best exemplified by the Zoroastrian-rooted ritual of leaping over fire on the last Wednesday night before the New Year (*chaharshanbeh suri*). During this purification ritual, one says while jumping “Your fiery red color is mine, and my sickly yellow paleness is yours.” The idea is that, at this liminal moment of the New Year, occurring at the vernal equinox, when winter gives way to spring, the jumper abandons the “yellow” (winter, sickness, bad fortune) and in exchange receives from the flame its “red” (warmth, spring, good fortune, energy, vigor). The new national dress, inaugurated in this period of liminality, demanded a similar faithful leap to sacrifice the “yellow” (Islamic “backwardness,” divided sub-national identities, civilizational malaise) in order to be cleansed and reborn through the power of the Cossack “red” (unity, efficiency, modernity).

The attempt to use uniform dress and shared collective experience to remove deep-rooted social divisions is also reminiscent of the *mati* (shipmate) bond that was instilled in Indian indentured workers brought to the Americas. These workers from different regions spoke different languages and came from different religions, genders, castes, and classes. In India, social interaction between these groups operated according to a variety of complicated rules, but in the almost slave-like conditions of ship life and

³³ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 13781 / E 1406, Tehran to FO, March 18, 1929.

plantation life in the Americas, they were forced to share the same closed, un-segregated space and work together as a unit, in identical clothing. Caste and religious differences and gender rules fell away as a fictive kinship developed based around the shared identity of the *mati* bond, which replaced previous constructions of identity. To support the construction of this new ideal, the mythical past of those in the new collective was appealed to for support and legitimacy, with the new group drawing inspiration not only from the *Ramayana* (A Hindu epic in which an unlikely band of heroes develop a fraternal bond in a strange land), but also from the Muslim celebration of Ashura (the commemoration of Imam Husayn's battle against tyrannical oppression).³⁴ This forgetting of communal "ownership" of myth was based on the erasure of previous distinctions as the result of the homogenizing policies of an authoritarian state. Reza Shah was attempting a similar project, trying to create a national identity in which previous distinctions could be forgotten.

"This edifying spectacle"

The "hat policy" was enforced systematically, in progressive stages. The cities would make the transition first, followed later by the country areas. Within the cities, there was a mixture of persuasion, coercion and prosecution. Persuasion was the most commonly employed method, followed by coercion, and then prosecution. In cities and towns, failure to comply resulted in a fine of up to five *tomans*, or up to seven days in prison. In country areas, imprisonment was to be the only option. Of course, the prescribed punishments were very rarely used. Instead more informal and often severe forms of discipline were used to coerce obedience. During the campaign:

³⁴ Clem Seecharan, *Tiger in the Stars* (London: Macmillan, 1997), pp.38-40, 51.

Policemen and army men may be seen daily in the street tearing off the hats of aged sheikhs, trampling on them and otherwise destroying them, the victims proceeding on their way, their bared heads covered with their *abas* [robes]. This policy of violence is being carried out systematically, different quarters of the town being chosen on different days for this edifying spectacle.³⁵

The headwear nationalization project faced the most challenges in Mashhad.

In Meshed – even more than in Qum – the bulk of the population is clothed in turbans and flowing *abas* [robes], and if the law is to be enforced strictly a comparatively small number of these will be able to retain their former dress... Meshed, after all, is in many respects very different to some other cities of Persia; in other towns the clergy are discredited, cynicism in respect of religious matters is openly displayed and views denoting skepticism regarding ancient tenets are openly expressed. In Meshed, however, this is not the case; the Shrine of Imam Reza is the holiest spot in Persia and from all parts of the country thousands of devout pilgrims come here each year confident in the belief that the visit to this holy place will atone for their earthly sins and ensure them bliss hereafter.³⁶

In other towns, the transformation was able to proceed well in advance of the law taking effect. In Yazd, for example, turban-makers were “discouraged” from continuing this practice well in advance of the official proscription, and only Pahlavi caps were allowed to be made. This ramp-up to the big event was so intense that in Yazd the cap-makers had to use tin while constructing the Pahlavi caps because they ran out of other materials. In this preparation in Yazd, there was a pre-emptive disciplining of holdouts, with those still wearing turbans insulted and their headwear stripped in public, so that by the law’s official start date the city would have already been transformed and all holdouts coerced into conformity before this point.

In Mashhad, however, the city’s economy revolved around pilgrim traffic and although the new law would allow the senior clerics to maintain their vestures of authority, the “lesser ecclesiastical lights” and assorted untrained mullas and others who

³⁵ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 13781, Tehran to FO, January 7, 1929.

³⁶ Ibid., FO 371 / 13781 / E 1406, Tehran to FO, March 18, 1929.

had made a living from pilgrim charity greatly opposed the new policy for threatening their livelihood. It was also very much disliked by the large number of religious Iranians who came to Mashhad to retire in the vicinity of the Shrine. To these individuals, the Pahlavi cap and accompanying coat were not only “repugnant” and “out of keeping with the atmosphere of this city,” but were “actually tainted with heresy.” The Pahlavi cap was worn willingly by cab drivers, young men with modern sensibilities and some other groups, but the poorer and more religious classes refused to participate and, just weeks before the official prohibition began, it was judged impossible to transform this large and unwilling populace in time. Even government employees, who had no choice but to comply if they wished to remain employed, were generally known to remove their Pahlavi caps and “return” to traditional wear outside of the office. Those who did wear the cap in public often did so subversively, leaving the cap permanently backwards as a mark of religiosity.³⁷

The Mashhad solution involved the use of strategic bribes and the further extension of the scope of religious exceptions in order to be able to claim success and also to “take the wind out of the sails” of those who opposed the change. Payments were made, for example, to wealthy tailors and merchants who would be stuck with large stocks of expensive, prohibited turbans, although lesser merchants and tailors were forced to take the loss. With these adaptations, it was correctly felt that since Mashhad was by inclination “timid,” there would be no serious opposition from the lower classes during the transformation, since the compromises to benefit the religious professionals and the

³⁷ Ibid.

elite merchants would ensure their complicity and the traditional masses would be forced to comply once they lacked the support of the traditional elite.³⁸

The further ambitions of the national clothing policy were scaled down because of the need for political maneuvering vis-à-vis the ulama, the failure of similarly bold reforms in Afghanistan (which gave the Shah serious pause), and fear of a potential Qashqai tribal rebellion. The Shah believed that Afghanistan had attempted to move too far too quickly and that this caused their problems.³⁹ So, not only did he tread lighter as he enforced male dress reform, but he also postponed his initial plans to begin to ban the veil in 1929.⁴⁰ He did not revive this plan until the beginning of 1936, months after the taming of clerical opposition through a bloody display of force in Mashhad.

The “object lesson” of the Mashhad Massacre

In the years between the nationalization of male and female attire, a number of additional policies were initiated that negatively impacted the ulama, including conscription and the nationalization of many of the functions of the clergy. The ulama had supported the coronation of Reza Shah because at the time this was seen as more palatable and less threatening than the prospect of a republic inspired by the Turkish model.⁴¹ The introduction of the Pahlavi Cap damaged the Court-clergy relationship but, more than anything else, it was an annoyance to the ulama, since qualified clerics were allowed to retain the turban. What was troubling was not so much the policy, but the way in which

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Chehabi, “Staging the Emperor's New Clothes,” p. 213. For the attempts at modernization in Turkey and Afghanistan in this period, see: Vartan Gregorian, *The Emergence of Modern Afghanistan: Politics of Reform and Modernization: 1880-1946* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969); and Bernard Lewis, *The Emergence of Modern Turkey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002).

⁴⁰ TNAPRO, FO 371 / 13781 / E 1406, Tehran to FO, March 18, 1929.

⁴¹ Ibid., FO 248 / 1392, Tehran to FO, November 16, 1934.

their authority was ignored, how they were now expected to receive legitimacy from the state rather than grant legitimacy to the state, and the likelihood of further moves against them, given the unnecessary anti-Islamic elements mixed into the homogenization of dress (such as the peak on the cap disrupting obligatory prayer rituals). This anxiety was justified by the introduction of a number of anti-clerical policies that severely restricted their income, spheres of authority, and autonomy. As a result, they were “disabused” of their initial expectations that crown-clergy relations under Reza Shah would not be that dissimilar from the traditional symbiotic partnership between the clergy and the monarch in Iran.

The Shah was, likewise, very anxious vis-à-vis the clergy and, almost from the very beginning of his reign, had his agents surveil the houses and activities of important clerics. This distrust intensified after *naw-ruz* 1928. The Queen and two princesses went to the Shrine of Fatima al-Ma’sumeh in Qom, practically unveiled, to celebrate this occasion, but were rebuked by Ayatollah Bafqi, the chief cleric present.⁴² As a result, Reza Shah infamously went to Qom and “kicked the Ayatollah down the steps of his own mosque.” In the clerical remembrance of this confrontation, he

surrounded the holy place of Qom with tanks and armed soldiers and intended to do to the holy place of those oppressed people what he [would later do in Mashhad (see below)] but God was not willing and fended off his evil... That unclean person (Reza Shah) entered the sacred space, and Bafqi was dragged to the mosque. Because of the hatred that he (Reza Shah) had felt for years toward him (Bafqi), he struck him with his weapon and his booted foot. Then he ordered that he and several other people be taken to Tehran, where he was imprisoned for six months, and then he was exiled... [and] was kept under constant surveillance until ... he either died of natural causes or was poisoned.⁴³

⁴² Chehabi, “Staging the Emperor's New Clothes,” p. 213.

⁴³ NACPM, NFAC (CIA), “Islam in Iran,” pp. 10-11.

These demonstrations of his “iron fist” and propensity for disproportionate responses to public embarrassment caused many among the clergy to abandon opposition and to instead wait for improved relations with the next Shah. As a result, there was very little organized clerical opposition on the streets. Although there were rare protests led by individual clerics, most ulama confined themselves to rhetorical jabs and flourishes.

At this time, it was remarked that

Religion plays but an insignificant part in modern Persian life. To the serious student of modern Persian history... it might appear that Persia was a very hot house of creeds, which is absolutely true, and that, hence, the Persian was intensely religious, which is absolutely untrue... Of recent years, the systematic whittling down of the powers of the clergy, the growth of a national spirit, the influence of Western materialism, and the national apathy towards the practice as opposed to the beliefs of religion have tended more and more to make religion in Persia a “museum piece.”⁴⁴

This attitude is reflected in periodic foreign political reports, which included sections on the ulama in the late 1920s, but did not consider them important enough to merit their own paragraph during the 1930s. It was felt that the ulama had “sunk to a level of insignificance not far above that of their brethren in Turkey.” Although the “Government’s initial policy of fostering national sentiments was accompanied by that of suppressing the power of the priests in various ways,” this became increasingly incidental, as shown by the reduction of governmental resources allocated to clerical discipline.⁴⁵

Towards the end of the 1920s, the ulama’s most intense animosity was not directed at Reza Shah himself, but rather at Abdolhosein Taymurtash (his Minister of Court and the chief architect of his domestic policy), and at the New Iran Party (Iran-e

⁴⁴ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1392, Tehran to FO, November 16, 1934.

⁴⁵ Ibid., FO 371 / 13781 / E 1406, Tehran to FO, March 18, 1929.

Naw, not to be confused with the later Iran Novin). In Tehran and Isfahan, opposition reached the point that the ulama threatened to collectively abandon the city and take refuge in Qom.⁴⁶ As a face-saving measure to prevent this, the Shah ostensibly limited Taymourtash's activities. This did not quell clerical anger at Taymurtash, who was singled out as the driving force behind policies to curtail clerical power and income through the nationalization of the legal system and the removal of the previous system in which "practically every little Mollah had a miniature religious court of law where notarial acts were performed and where matters relating to personal status were arranged." Individuals close to both the Shah and Taymurtash confirm that it was this advisor who was the driving force behind the anti-Islamic undercurrents of the domestic nationalization policies, while Reza Shah was not particularly concerned with this agenda and was personally inclined towards showing sympathy towards those "who are struggling for their continued existence as a power in the land."⁴⁷

The frequent retreats to Qom in this period, led by the clergy of Isfahan, were not only done as a form of political protest, but were also "to decide what steps they can usefully take to protect themselves." In the debates of those who had taken *bast*, the main issue was that the clergy "feel their influence has waned" and were upset but unable to come up with a useful strategy to combat a large and growing list of grievances against the regime. The consensus was that the problem was really Taymurtash, not the Shah, and that if the Minister of Court were removed then their prospects of influencing the Shah would improve. This approach was naively optimistic, at best, but there was an overwhelming sense of frustration and helplessness that was assuaged by focusing on

⁴⁶ Chehabi, "Staging the Emperor's New Clothes," p. 212.

⁴⁷ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1383, British Legation to FO, October 21, 1927.

Taymurtash. The Minister of Court, ever-dismissive of the clergy, described the agitation against him as the prater of those who, out of self-interest, were “playing the fool with religion and national traditions.”⁴⁸

The Shah was not amused by the grandstanding of the clerics from Qom and Isfahan. He ignored the *bast* and instead traveled to Mazandaran to demonstrate his supposed lack of concern for the goings on in Qom. When a peasant from one of the Shah’s villages complained about the lack of rain, he replied that he too hoped for rain, but “let it come as far as this only, for God forbid that it should come to [Qom], Isfahan and Shiraz.” Similarly, when pestered about the need to go to Kerman, he replied that he would only go by plane since he refused to pass through either Qom or Isfahan, such was his disgust with the escalating clerical complaints from these cities. Clerical demands mushroomed to include an end to the conscription of religious students, the holding of free elections, a return to constitutional monarchy, opposition to the New Iran Party and the Ministers of Court and Justice, and a desire to revive the unenforced provision in the Constitution allowing for a group of ulama to have veto power over the majles (parliament). The idea was even floated that all previous legislation by the majles, done without this group’s approval, including the recognition of the Shah’s sovereignty, was illegitimate.⁴⁹ This idea was essentially a clerical expression of buyer’s remorse and a longing to undue their complicity in Reza Shah’s sovereignty, or at least return to the days when his power was less secure and the symbolic capital of their legitimization had more value.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

The governmental response to their demands—the possibility of nominal action against the New Iran party—was not seen as a satisfactory return for the investment in the clerical protest, since they had “spent a considerable amount of money on the strike and they will certainly want some proportionate result.”⁵⁰ Given the money involved in supporting the clerical strike and retreat to Qom, Reza Shah believed that the British were behind the protest in order to support their clerical allies and oppose the centralization of power under the Shah. British sources deny this and claim that the opposition was patronized by the clergy in Isfahan.

By the early 1930s, “Reza Shah was powerful enough to ignore the clergy.”⁵¹ He increasingly transferred important legal functions, like certification of legal ownership, from the clergy to the secular courts. Along with the conscription of religious students and the proscription on male Islamic dress, this nationalization of much of the clergy’s legal functions was seen as a direct attack on Islam and an attempt to move in the direction of Turkey and completely sideline the clergy. Moreover, the removal of these legal functions represented not just a loss in status but also an often critical loss of income. As a result, many lower and middling clerics gave up their turbans to seek a secular career in the civil service performing essentially the same tasks, albeit in a different uniform and authority structure.

Most of those who stayed within the clerical fold retreated into a defensive, bitter quietism. The major exception occurred in Mashhad in 1935, spurred by individual initiative, when a popular protest took place after a rogue cleric severely criticized the government’s policies. It should be kept in mind that anti-government sentiment in

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ NACPM, NFAC (CIA), “Islam in Iran,” p. 39.

Mashhad was very high in some quarters not because of the regime's anti-Islamic policies, as is often read back into the episode, and not because of its reputation as "the least progressive city in Persia," but because of local issues, especially attempts to reform the finances of the Imam Reza Shrine.

Although the protestors chanted that "the Shah is a new Yazid,"⁵² they were left alone for several days because local security forces were unwilling to violate the sanctity of the Shrine. The protests did not spread to other major cities and did not receive the active support of the clerical hierarchy, despite its later appropriation of this resistance. While Ayatollah Qomi was in favor of protest, Grand Ayatollah Hae'ri-Yazdi in Qom kept himself in seclusion to avoid involvement. Security forces raided the mosque and the Shrine on July 13, 1935, killing some, but failing to disperse protestors. When they temporarily retreated, more individuals came to join the protest. The following day, security forces attacked again and crushed the protestors in a brutal massacre, shooting into crowds with machine guns and dumping the resulting bodies into a mass grave. The details of the massacre were kept out of the press and the whole episode was blamed on the administrator of the Shrine, who was executed.⁵³ After this decisive show of force, quietism gained even more converts among the clerical community. This massacre was later described by the British as a particularly effective "object lesson" for the clergy.⁵⁴

⁵² Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran*, p.94. Yazid I (d. 683) was the second Caliph of the Umayyad dynasty. He is important, for our purposes, because he is seen in Shi'ism as an unjust and tyrannical usurper. When he was challenged by Imam Husayn—the son of 'Ali ibn Abi Talib and the grandson of Mohammad—his forces defeated Husayn's small band of followers and killed the Imam. The suffering and martyrdom of Imam Husayn are commemorated every year during Ashura, on the 10th day of the month of Moharram. The rituals related to the commemoration of Imam Husayn's sacrifice are among the most important and defining aspects of Shi'ism. As the villain against which Husayn battled, and the one responsible for his death, Yazid became a symbol for the forces arrayed against the righteous, and against Shi'ism in particular, which should be opposed, even at the cost of one's life.

⁵³ Chehabi, "Staging the Emperor's New Clothes," pp. 216-7.

⁵⁴ NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 16 / 4 / Box 6, Dispatch No. 790, May 13, 1936.

Pre-Islamicization

Iranian nationalism in this period, as expressed in elite circles, was largely based on the idea that Iranians were members of the Aryan race, that—before Islam—Iranian empires matched or exceeded those of Europe, and that Iran has since forgotten herself and been brought low as the result of either Islam in general or certain aspects of Islam (such as the ulama). In order to become great again, and resist imperialism, Iran supposedly needed to do two things: nationalize its human and material resources under a strong central government, and overcome the inferiority complex and forgetfulness of self brought on by the Islamic period.⁵⁵

This second task involved the promotion of an Iranian national identity that was rooted in pre-Islamic culture. It was for this reason that, at the same time that European dress was being adopted: the “pure” Persian language was also being promoted, Reza Shah promoted himself as Iran’s first “pure born” shah since the pre-Islamic period, the mythical history of ancient Iran as recounted in the epic *Shahnameh* was promoted and celebrated by the state, Iran returned to a solar calendar (instead of the lunar Islamic calendar), and the Shah promoted the idea that Persia should be known as “Iran,” specifically for the purpose of reminding Europeans that Iranians were Aryan.⁵⁶

The adoption of the French-styled cap in the late 1920s, and of the fedora in 1935, were framed not as attempts to mimic a technologically superior West (as occurred elsewhere in the Middle East and in other places in the world), but rather as a rediscovery of Iran’s roots by wearing the contemporary dress of those who shared their race and

⁵⁵ For Aryanism in Iran, see: Alireza Asgharzadeh, *Iran and the Challenge of Diversity: Islamic Fundamentalism, Aryanist Racism, and Democratic Struggle* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

⁵⁶ Chehabi, “Staging the Emperor's New Clothes,” pp. 217, 224, 226.

ancient origins. Those who accepted this ideology believed that Europeanization was really pre-Islamicization, not de-Islamicization, as it was fundamentally an attempt to go back to pre-Islamic times by adopting the contemporary fashions of modern fellow Aryans. This logic seems bizarre, but it is really not that different from when African-Americans adopt “African” dress as a way to get back to their roots, although the “African” dress worn is that of—or inspired by—*contemporary* “Africa” (itself a loaded, modern, and problematic term) rather than the styles actually worn by the ancestors with whom they are trying to connect. If an African-American woman can feel more “African” by wearing a head wrap inspired by contemporary Africa, then Reza Shah could feel more “Aryan” by wearing a fedora from contemporary Europe.

My point is that symbolic meaning is socially constructed and, although most of the population perceived of the change in dress laws in terms of what was lost and saw it in terms of de-Islamicization, those who actively promoted these measures looked at the policies primarily as a return to the past instead of a rejection of the present. This brings to mind Fish’s discussion of interpretive communities and how those who are socialized in similar ways often develop similar interpretive strategies and that, as such, there is no stable basis for meaning or “correct” reading, since the interpretation of the author does not adhere in what he produces.⁵⁷ Thus, the elites and the conservative masses perceived of the same object of clothing in radically different ways.

The racial definition of Iranian nationhood (influenced by Reza Shah’s sensitivity to criticism and keeping up appearances) distracted from, and conflicted with, the desire to make a new Iranian nation through homogenization of dress. In order for dress

⁵⁷ Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in This Class? The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1980), pp. 11, 14, 43, 97, 174.

nationalization to work, it needed to be consistent, but the push for Europeanization demanded that Iran stay au courant with the latest fashions. As a result, the Pahlavi cap of 1927-8 was largely superseded by the enforcement of the fedora and other hat policies by 1935. The loss of the nationalistic utility of the original cap is implicitly admitted in the reference to the “international” (*bayn al-mellali*) nature of later hats. As the idea of male national dress was increasingly sidelined by the desire to assert a European identity, the plans for female national dress, in the context of the clerical opposition in Mashhad, were framed, almost from the beginning, in terms of the removal of supposedly harmful Islamic influence. European dress for men was not primarily framed in terms of removing Islamic male dress, but was instead staged positively as “a return to the true self.”⁵⁸ Female dress reform was not staged as a return to racial dress, but rather as an occasion for the collective rejection of Islam as the cause of national weakness.

“Dressed like Iranians”

Female national dress was originally supposed to be introduced on *naw-ruz* 1929, but had been delayed because overwhelming conservative opposition to similar policies in Afghanistan had forced the abdication of the king of Afghanistan, which made Reza Shah nervous. The Shah was moved, however, to revive his plans for female dress reform after his visit to Turkey in June 1934. In comparison with Turkey, Iran was felt to be comparatively “backwards” when it came to the status of women in society. When he returned to Iran, the Shah felt the need to catch up with Turkey. In many ways his rush to unveil Iranian women was “keeping up with the Joneses at the international level.”⁵⁹

⁵⁸ Chehabi, “Staging the Emperor's New Clothes,” pp. 216, 223.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 215.

The banning of the veil on January 7, 1936, was in many respects secondary to the introduction of national dress for men. Although de-veiling has received more attention in Iranian historiography than the removal of male headwear, it was initially conceived of as a complement to the initiative for male national dress, to follow shortly thereafter. Several things happened as a result of the delay. Whereas the push for the Pahlavi cap occurred in a largely ad hoc fashion, with an initially steep learning curve, the proscription of the veil occurred after several years of dialectical tension, such that the rhetoric and tactics of the opposition could be anticipated and preemptively countered.

Like the first wave of dress nationalization, this new effort also made use of persuasion, coercion, and prosecution. This time, however, there was much less emphasis on prosecution, while the persuasive strategies were significantly more sophisticated, as were the manipulations involved in forcing compliance. The crushing of clerical opposition in 1935 also made the enforcement of this policy easier, since after the massacre in Mashhad there was no organized opposition as there had been in the period following the introduction of the Pahlavi Cap.

The nationalization of female dress became increasingly pulled away from the original nationalist aspirations of dress reform and was instead drawn into an explicitly anti-Islamic discourse as a result of its conflation with the Shah's anti-Muslim, Westernizing agenda. This was also due to the extended period separating it from the initial rhetoric on nationalization of dress, and the way in which female dress reform was almost exclusively aimed at Muslim women rather than all Iranian women, in the way that the Pahlavi cap was imposed on all men (not exempted).

There had certainly been an anti-Muslim component to male headwear reform, and the Shah's chief vitriol was always reserved for the turbaned rather than any other group. With female headwear nationalization, however, it was harder to subsume the anti-Islamic aspects of the agenda under the umbrella of homogenization for the purposes of nationalization. Although nationalist language was still being used, the goal was no longer to homogenize to create a nation, but rather to mark Muslim women as traitors to the newly-imagined Iranian national identity, which was rooted in nostalgia for pre-Islamic glory and the hope of post-Islamic modernization to regain this rightful station.

By defining Iran's national identity in pre- and post-Islamic terms, Reza Shah conspicuously rejected the Islamic period as "other" to Iran, and blamed Islam for its fall from glory. The attack was two-pronged, emphasizing not only Islamic responsibility for Iran's "fall," but also blaming Islam for Iran's failure to be demonstrably resurrected as a modern nation, and for the limited successes that the Shah was able to deliver after a decade on the throne.

Islam was made the scapegoat for all that was wrong in Iran and the veil was made the symbol of Islam, a demon to be exorcised from the national body so that it may again rise, strong and rigorous, and achieve its true potential. As Chehabi relates, "the veil became a marker of backwardness for educated Iranians."⁶⁰ The major press outlets, all semi-official governmental organs, presented these arguments to the public as uncontested, scientific truths. Iran's most prominent paper, *Ettela'at*, for example, editorialized that it was the veil that caused women to have weak minds and bodies. The case against the veil was made, without any opportunity for rebuttal, by appealing to every conceivable form of expertise: Orientalists and other foreign authorities were

⁶⁰ Chehabi, "Staging the Emperor's New Clothes," p. 211.

quoted at length about the supposedly retarding nature of Islam and the veil; scientists expounded at length on the reasons why the veil should not be used and claimed that it promoted poor hygiene; poets composed numerous works attacking the veil as repressive and unfair to women, comparing it to the shrouds for the dead, while further poems were solicited from the readership as part of competitions to see who could best attack the veil in verse; and, finally, pro-government clerics made the case that veiling was actually a pre-Islamic practice and that, in any case, the Qur'an itself only calls for modesty and never truly endorses the veil, but instead actually has many verses in support of *unveiling*.⁶¹ The overwhelming support for unveiling in the media undoubtedly managed to persuade many that they were justified in either acquiescing or supporting the proscription of the veil, in spite of the cynical lens through which Iranians took in the official press.

The press deliberately avoided acknowledging veiled women and instead, through the image of Iran conveyed through advertisements and photographs of events with unveiled women, created the idea that the policy was being universally embraced. Glowing articles featured images of unveiled women, sometimes even in shorts, engaged in sports and other wholesome activities. Unveiled women, such as eight hundred scouts who paraded through the streets days after the proscription, were staged by the media as the Iranian ideal of progress and transformation. Veiled women, however, were marked as traitors to the nation and the veil itself castigated as “unhygienic,” “obsolete,” “contemptible,” “awkward,” “ignominious,” and “uncouth.”⁶²

⁶¹ NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 16 / 4 / Box 6, Dispatch No. 790, May 13, 1936.

⁶² *Ibid.*, Box 8, January 10, 1956.

In theory, the unveiled Iranian woman, rather than being an imitation of the Western woman, was to be a citizen of the proud Iranian nation and a helpmate to her male counterpart in the process of nation building. Reza Shah describes how, prior to his reign, women were never even counted in official records, with the exception of accounts of rations during the Great War. But now, he claims, women have been elevated to be counted and to join with men in building the nation. While Iran was previously only half a nation, it would become whole when the veil is cast off and its other half emerges.⁶³ This new Iranian woman was not treated as a sexualized object in the anti-veiling rhetoric, but was rather a national subject who would practice modesty and frugality and dress simply. Interestingly, the Shah says that prior to unveiling most women had been “outside society.” This implies that, while the new unveiled women were now entering society, those conservative women who still sought to veil were marked as “outside” of Iran’s borders.

Shi’ism’s founding myths were re-purposed by the state in order to promote unveiling. The traditional view of the Imams, and Imam Husayn in particular, as tragic figures to be mourned, was re-imagined as part of the push for unveiling, which called for women to abandon the black shrouds of sadness and mourning and instead don their caps and coats and draw from the kinetic and heroic aspects of Imam Husayn and Imam Ali’s story.⁶⁴ This kinetic reinterpretation of Shi’ism’s great tragedy, linked to a dynamic re-imagining of the meaning of Shi’ism’s founding myths, would be taken up, generations

⁶³ Ibid., Box 6, Dispatch No. 790, May 13, 1936.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

later, by Shi'ite reformists like Ali Shariati, for the service of an entirely different agenda.⁶⁵

The emphasis on frugality and the pre-emptive denunciation of ostentatious dress display a high level of planning by the state and an acute awareness of issues likely to be raised by the clerical opposition. Preemptive action occurred on several other fronts as a result of the lessons learned in 1928. This time, many employees were given advances on their salaries in order to buy new outfits for their wives, cheap clothing was ordered from Paris well in advance and in sufficient supply, and measures were put in place to prevent profiteering by tailors and merchants.⁶⁶ The preparation was such that almost all non-religious obstacles and objections had been planned for and addressed, and there was not a repeat of the difficulties that hindered efforts in 1928 (such as a shortage of materials).

As for religious objection, in addition to the aforementioned media blitz, this was dealt with through the prosecution of those who enabled resistance and through the coercion of both veiled women and their spouses. The fines for non-compliance were not levied on the violators themselves, but rather on those who enabled their non-conformity. Taxis and buses were fined for offering transport to veiled women, while shops were not to sell to them, and they were not to be allowed to use the (major) streets, or the public bath, or the cinema.⁶⁷ When women were discovered still wearing the veil, it was their husbands who would be fired from positions in the civil service, or lose their position in the army. This indirect policy cleverly avoided direct action against *hijab*-minded

⁶⁵ For Shariati, see: Ali Rahnama, *An Islamic Utopian: a Political Biography of Ali Shariati* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2000).

⁶⁶ NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 16 / 4 / Box 6, Dispatch No. 790, May 13, 1936.

⁶⁷ Chehabi, "Staging the Emperor's New Clothes," p. 218.

women, instead creating immense pressure on their male peers to ensure that “their” women acquiesced to the proscription.

At the same time that the media barrage was pushing the anti-veiling campaign, the Shah sought to deflate the opposition of the traditional elite by making them complicit in the act. Around the country “festivals” were proclaimed in which local elites were forced to attend parties with their wives unveiled. Government employees who did not comply risked losing their job, or worse. These mandatory festivals took place among all elite and prominent groups. They began with the women of the Shah’s own household appearing unveiled at key events. Members of the majles (parliament) were subsequently compelled to appear at gatherings with their wives unveiled. Across the nation, governors and mayors were to have similar gatherings and compel all those under them to attend. Other participants of these “festivals” included army officers, *Imam Jom’ehs* (Friday prayer leaders) and other prominent clerics, prominent merchants, and the heads of guilds. Even in Qom and Mashhad, ulama were compelled to bring their wives unveiled, pray for the success of the Shah, and even “voluntarily” abandon their own turbans, despite this not being required of senior clergy.⁶⁸

Many attended these gatherings under protest only to be blindsided later as photographs were taken and plastered over the local papers as “proof” of their support for the unveiling movement. The members of the traditional elite who were unwillingly shunted into the pro-unveiling camp could not then come out to forcefully call on the masses to remain veiled when they themselves were photographed with their unveiled wives. Iranian mobs generally formed around the leadership of a powerful patron from the traditional elite. By preemptively neutralizing much of the traditional elite in this

⁶⁸ NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 16 / 4 / Box 6, Dispatch No. 790, May 13, 1936.

way, there was less chance of an organized conservative backlash, at least in the short-term.

To support the new policies, editorials were employed to question the morals of women who appeared unveiled on some occasions (i.e. the festivals) but not on others. This strategy involved the suggestion that the veil was a form of disguise and that a woman who had abandoned the veil would only later resort to the “disguise” of a veil if she was using it to facilitate promiscuity or adultery.⁶⁹ This was part of a larger effort to invert the traditional conservative claim that the veil guarded modesty and that unveiling was linked to sexual wantonness. The attempt to reverse these categories was also supported by more tangible tactics, such as ordering prostitutes to veil while respected women were pressured to unveil, in order to solidify the inversion of the signposts of modesty. As traditionalists were assaulted by this bizarre version of the established order, some were so dazed that they saw these events as part of “the chaos preceding the end of the world.”⁷⁰

By March of 1936, foreign reporters noted that not a single veil could be seen in the major cities, including the religious capital of Mashhad.⁷¹ This does not mean that there were no unveiled women on the back streets, or in the country areas, but it does speak to their systematic exclusion from the public sphere and confirm that they were denied entry to the avenues, public baths, carriages, taxis, buses, and cinemas. They were marked as “other” and unwelcome, with shops in the bazaar refusing to sell to them. This stigma carried over from the veil to Islamic markers in general.

⁶⁹ Ibid., Box 8, January 10, 1956.

⁷⁰ NACPM, NFAC (CIA), “Islam in Iran,” p. 47.

⁷¹ Ibid., RG 84 / 350 / 61 / 16 / 4 / Box 6, Dispatch No. 790, May 13, 1936.

Even foreigners in Iran were not allowed to veil unless it was part of their “national dress.” If they came from a country where veiling was not practiced, then they were not to be allowed to veil within Iran. The rationale for this was that veiling was opposed to Iran’s “national dress.” To be *unveiled* was to be “dressed like an Iranian” and it was thus unacceptable and insulting to Iranians to veil within Iran, unless one was from an Arab nation where this was your “national dress.”⁷² This, of course, framed the veiled woman, employed as the symbol of Islam, as the antithesis of “Iranian,” a traitor to the nation and an internal “foreign” element.

Conclusion

The cultural history of the Reza Shah period is typically analyzed in connection with familiar tropes of Iranian historiography, such as the supposed continuity of the Court-clergy struggle. What is often overlooked is that Reza Shah’s attempt to upend tradition was, fundamentally, an attempt to imagine a new national identity. This attempt was clouded by the anti-clerical and pro-Aryan sentiments of the Shah and his advisors, and by the clerical opposition and the authority struggle produced by this conflict.

Despite the presentist tendency to see Islam as a natural and inevitable basis for Iranian nationhood, there was not, in the early Reza Shah period, any strong popular desire or movement to stage Islam as the basis of *national* identity. There were, of course, numerous attempts to oppose the erosion of clerical authority, to promote *shari’ah* (Islamic canon law), and to oppose specific policies that were seen as against Islam, but these responses were defensive, scattered, and not framed in the rhetoric of

⁷² Ibid.

nationalism. Instead, they appealed to a mixture of traditional rationales and xenophobia and seemed unwilling to recognize or engage the new national paradigm.

As previously discussed, nationalism involves the re-orientation of previously existing cultural productions, a process that rarely occurs quickly and never occurs in a vacuum. Although there was significant clerical opposition to Reza Shah, Shi'ism did not undergo a significant nationalist re-orientation until the 1940s, and this did not reach the threshold of a developed ideology until the 1960s. In this later discourse, the case against the regime is not made in terms of specific classes, like the clergy, or in terms of abstract concepts like "Islam" in general. Instead, in this later discourse, it is actively claimed that the state, the Shah, and even the clergy, are all subordinate to the "Muslim nation."⁷³ During the Reza Shah period, however, the ulama were still thinking imperially. By this I mean that they still believed that the paramount issue in the church-state dynamic was that the ruler identify himself as Shi'ite, enforce the shari'ah at least nominally, and respect the ulama's spheres of authority. In other words, in a post-War environment defined by the emergence of nation-states, the dissolution of empires, and the global embrace of the idea of the self-determination of each nation, the ulama in this period continued to maintain a top-down approach that was initially generated in, and was appropriate for, an imperial milieu.

This section has explored how, due to the mutual castigation of Reza Shah and the ulama, the sovereign came to be marked as the oppressor of Shi'ism, rather than its defender, and the ulama came to be marked (in the press, the public sphere, and among the intelligentsia) as a foreign, vestigial class, which was comparable to an anchor decelerating the nation's progressive march.

⁷³ See Chapter III.

Appendix III

The Imbrie Affair

American Vice Consul Robert Imbrie was murdered in Tehran on July 18, 1924. Supposedly, Imbrie, his associate Melvin Seymour, and their Armenian employees were attacked for taking photographs of women near the Saqa Khaneh (a supposedly miraculous public fountain at the Shaykh Hadi intersection in Tehran) by a “fanatical” mob, while several policemen and soldiers died protecting them.¹ This story was promoted by the Iranian government through the semi-official press, but was contradicted by eyewitness account and by the physical evidence, which make it clear that Imbrie and Seymour were attacked because they were marked as “Baha’i.”² To fully appreciate the circumstances leading to the attack, one must realize that Imbrie and Seymour represented several contemporary and interrelated threats to the ulama. Although he had only been in Iran for several months, Imbrie had aroused considerable clerical ire for his intervention on behalf of the Baha’is, while Seymour was in the oil business and thereby tied to the debate over extending oil rights for northern Iran to the Americans, threatening British interests in Iran.

¹ See, for example, NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 7 / 1 / 1, Vol. 153, pp. 159-65.

² See, for example, W. Smith Murray, "Report on the Murder of U.S. Consul Imbrie in Tehran, 1924, on Charges of Being a Baha'i." *Documents on the Shaykhi, Babi and Baha'i Movements*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (July, 1997). Accessed February 2, 2011. <http://www.h-net.org/~bahai/docs/imbrie.htm>; and *The New York Times*, January 19, 1925.

“They are going to kill Dr. Moody!”

Anti-Baha’i sentiment and anti-American protests collided and coalesced as a result of plans to murder Dr. Susan Moody and her subsequent appeal to Vice Consul Imbrie for assistance. Dr. Moody was an elderly American Baha’i woman who had been living and working in Iran for about fifteen years. She came to Iran in 1909, several years after converting to the Baha’i Faith, in order to provide health care to women at a new Baha’i-run hospital, as well as through her own private practice. While in Iran, she also became involved in the education field, training several Iranian women to become nurses and midwives using modern techniques. She was also instrumental in developing one of the first formal schools for girls in Tehran. This school was highly regarded and, although Baha’i-run, attracted a diverse student body despite the stigma associated with the Baha’i Faith. She was later joined in her efforts by three other prominent American Baha’i women. One of these women, Lillian Kappes, ran the girl’s school, while the other two—Elizabeth Stewart and Dr. Sarah Clock—joined in Dr. Moody’s medical work (although they were also involved in the schools). Kappes and Clock died in 1920 and 1922, respectively. By 1924, only Dr. Moody and her assistant Elizabeth Stewart remained, and Stewart was in poor health.³

In Tehran, rumors circulated that on Ashura (the tenth day of Moharram—August 12, 1924) a thousand Baha’is were to be massacred, and that the list had already been created. Dr. Moody was targeted for death before then, however, perhaps to take advantage of the anti-American sentiment of the moment, which was said to have been encouraged by the British in response to American attempts to secure oil rights in

³ R. Jackson Armstrong-Ingram, “Susan I. Moody,” *Research Notes in Shaykhi, Babi and Baha’i Studies*, No. 2 (June, 1997). Accessed February 2, 2011. <http://www.h-net.org/~bahai/notes/moody.htm>.

northern Iran. Moody was constantly harassed and was informed that she would be killed on July 12. Fearing for her life, she sought the help of Vice Consul Imbrie. She appealed for protection as an American citizen, and Imbrie responded by demanding that the Chief of Police assign sufficient troops to protect her. As a result of his intervention, when an angry mob of more than two hundred descended on her residence, “demanding her blood” on the night of the 12th, they were met by a “flying column” of policemen who immediately broke up the mob before any damage could be done. Because of his intervention on behalf of a prominent Baha’i, and the fact that the commanding officer of the troops that he had had arranged to protect her was also a Baha’i, the disappointed leaders of the attack came to believe that Imbrie was also himself a secret Baha’i.⁴

“The Hue and Cry of Baha’ism”

More needs to be said to contextualize these accusations and conspiracies, which may seem paranoid and bizarre to outside observers but which carried tremendous weight at the time. Negar Mottahedeh has, in her tracing of the term “Baha’i” in Iranian history, exposed the ways in which the term has evolved into a packed and multivalent term that does not merely imply membership in the Baha’i religion. In her exploration, she shows how objects as disparate as the bold fashion choice of an Orientalist, the naturalism of a Qajar princess, and a disliked innovation in headwear could all be termed “Babi / Baha’i” with equal validity and naturalness despite the fact that none of the objects of discussion had any obvious relation to each other and despite the fact that none of them had any clear connection to the Baha’i religion.⁵ The word became, for non-Baha’i Iranians, an

⁴ Murray, “A consideration of the Bahai Religion,” pp. 2-3.

⁵ Mottahedeh, *Representing the Unrepresentable*, pp. 22-50.

umbrella-term with which to refer, in a derogatory manner, to progressive social change or challenges to existing authority. The roots of the insult go back the Babi movement, which promoted an eclectic mixture of progressive reforms, a punk-like ethos of rebellion against existing authority, a focus on extreme forms of ascetic religiosity, and a fascination with the esoteric. In the popular imagination, Babism is (falsely) associated with anarchy, antinomianism, drunkenness, wanton sexuality, and bloodshed. Because of this perception, the term not only implies progressive change, but progressive change that is heretical and which will only lead to waywardness and social chaos. The term could be used by the conservative or nostalgic to, with a single word, denounce a person or thing as heretical, anti-traditional, novel, excessive, wayward, misguided, naïve, and bound for failure. It could also, simply, be used as a convenient slander against which there was no easy defense. This loose bandying about of so potent an insult was the subject of an article in an Iranian journal at the time, which pointed out that

The events of the time of Nasser-ed-Din Shah, when liberal and progressive people were killed under the name of Bahais, are being repeated in Tehran. Anybody who has a grudge against another calls him a Bahai. No person with clean clothes and proper looks who wears a collar and necktie can safely pass through the streets and the bazaars in the southern part of the city.⁶

The article goes on to relate an incident in which a six or seven-year-old girl was being assaulted by a boy of twelve or thirteen. She called out to a nearby man for protection, so he chased the boy away. "Thereupon the boy started to shout, 'This is a Bahai', and were it not for the fact that the passerby in that street knew him, a serious incident would have taken place." The writer laments that although the actual number of

⁶ NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 7 / 1 / 1, Vol. 153, p. 189.

Baha'is in Tehran was quite small, all liberal and progressive-minded intellectuals are targeted as "Baha'i."

When used by the ulama, the term takes on an added weight and becomes more of a threat than a description, invoking intimations of apostasy from Islam and the need for the individual to be dealt with harshly. As with accusations of witchcraft, or the smearing of McCarthyism, the stigma of being publicly "outed" as a Baha'i was difficult to remove. As such, the ulama's use of this tactic against Reza Shah and others was regarded as a serious escalation. Two years before the Imbrie episode, Prime Minister Ahmad Qavam was locked in a power struggle with then Minister of War, Reza Khan (the future Reza Shah). The Prime Minister utilized the ulama in this struggle, initiating the "the recrudescence of clerical power in Persia." As a result, at no time since the days of Fazlallah Nuri, during the Constitutional Revolution, "have the clergy been in possession of such dangerous power as is theirs today," for "They, who had the day before been suppliants, now became dictators." This recrudescence was, in part, inspired by Iraqi ulama, who were in communication with their Iranian counterparts, blaming their weakness on internal divisions and urging them to mobilize and organize to more effectively leverage their power to take advantage of the moment of opportunity.⁷

One of the most effective tactics in this clerical agitation was to accuse Reza Khan and his allies of being secret Baha'is and enemies of Islam. These charges from the clerical opposition were subsequently adopted by the opposition in general, as "Reza Khan's political enemies have taken advantage of the restored prestige of the clergy to raise the hue and cry of Bahaism against him, the danger of which accusation in present-

⁷ Murray, "Report on the Murder," pp. 9-12.

day densely ignorant Persia is by no means to be underestimated.”⁸ These charges were supported by doctored photos showing Reza Khan wearing the portrait and insignia of Baha’u’llah, which prompted him to save face through awkward and defensive public acts of religiosity, such as commissioning a portrait of Ali from the Atabat (Najaf and Karbala).⁹ While doctored photos may have had an effect on the less sophisticated, the more dangerous aspects of the polemic tried to conflate Reza Khan’s policies with those of the Baha’is. Reza Khan desired a secular republic for a number of reasons, including his antipathy for religion and desire to emulate his hero, Ataturk (who formed a secular republic in Turkey), but the clerical polemic linked his desire for a republic with the section in *The Kitab-i-Aqdas* (the most holy book of the Baha’is), addressed to Iran, that promises “Let nothing grieve thee, O Land of Ta [Tehran]... Erelong will the state of affairs within thee be changed, and the reins of power fall into the hands of the people [i.e. a republic].”¹⁰

Those accusing him of Baha’ism also pointed to Reza Khan’s acceptance of Baha’is in the government and the military. Reza Khan saw the army and the institutions of the state as homogenizing machines, where one could advance despite the disadvantages of birth. As such, an American report notes that he “has freely made use in the Army and the Government of the intelligent services of the Bahais.”¹¹ This lack of concern for communal difference was perceived as a sign that Reza Khan was himself a Baha’i, or at the very least a sympathizer.

⁸ Ibid., p. 6.

⁹ Murray, “A consideration of the Bahai Religion,” p. 12.

¹⁰ Quoted in Baha’u’llah, *Gleanings*, p. 110.

¹¹ Murray, “Report,” p. 10.

The attack on Imbrie and Seymour also occurred in the context of the debate over the future of Iran and, particularly, the controversy over Reza Shah's desire for a secular republic, on the Turkish model. The British were opposed to the idea of a republic and preferred the idea of a monarchy dependent on the old elites, such as the ulama and the landlords, which they believed would prove more pliable and amenable to British interests. The Russians were also distrustful of the idea of a republic. Murray notes that the British and the Russians, for the first time since the Russian Revolution, "joined hands" in order to block Reza Khan's desire to create a genuinely independent Republic. American consular sources report that large sums of money were funneled to willing clerics for this purpose, to encourage "popular" demonstrations against the prospect of a republic. Reza Shah, who was at the time known for displaying "a lamentable moral weakness in all the crises of his career," dealt "badly" with the protests, responding with violence that only hurt his position and strengthened the popular base and morale of the opposition, while adding credence to the polemic regarding his personal religious beliefs. He was forced to go to Qom to feign contrition before the leading clerics, and the push for a republic was effectively ended. Moreover:

The fanaticism of the crowd was so incited by the continuous preaching of the Mullahs that any act on his part would have been interpreted as treason to Islam and prima facie evidence that he was a Bahai; hence his [subsequent] unfortunate orders to the military and the police not to intervene under any circumstances in religious demonstrations and under no circumstances to fire.¹²

Clerical opposition to a republic was not based on mere patronage, but also on self-interest and fear of suffering the fate that Islam had suffered in Turkey after the establishment of Ataturk's secular republicanism. Observers consistently note that,

¹² Ibid., p. 12.

although the clergy hated the Reza Khan regime, they feared a republic far more. As Murray puts it:

To a close observer of Persian affairs it is beyond question that, had Reza Khan succeeded in establishing the Republic in March of this year, it would have been the death knell to the power of the clergy, which the latter realized only too well. I furthermore know personally that it was his firm determination to have proceeded, immediately upon the establishment of the Republic, with a revision of the Constitution which would have separated church from state and secularized the law.¹³

Also of deep concern for the ulama was the debate over an oil bill that would have extended drilling rights in northern Iran to American oil interests, specifically Sinclair Oil. Clerical opposition was again utilized by the British to protect their monopoly over Iranian oil. And, again, the clerics also had their own self-interest at stake. “The clergy immediately rose to the occasion, for, upon passage of the oil bill, all sides expected Reza Khan to assume dictatorial control” and “The realization of this situation on the part of the clerical opposition has incited them more than anything else to oppose the passage of the bill.”¹⁴

The Americans, unlike the British, favored a republic and had no ties to, or affection for, the ulama. American enthusiasm for republicanism, desire for access to the oil markets, and intervention to prevent anti-Baha’i agitation became so conflated by some Tehran clerics that these disparate aims and attitudes were imagined as a unified program of American anti-clericalism. This assessment was not helped by American cultural disrespect. There was, for example, anger at some American diplomats who were discovered frequenting brothels disguised (badly and stereotypically) as mullahs.¹⁵

¹³ Ibid., p. 10.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 11.

¹⁵ NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 7 / 1 / 1, Vol. 152, p. 237.

This clerical apprehension of American attitudes vis-à-vis the future role of Shi'ism in Iran, although exaggerated, is not totally baseless. In an American assessment of religion in Iran, Baha'is are clearly favored over Muslims and are described as the "best solution" for Iran, short of a national return to a revived and re-imagined Zoroastrianism. In Murray's study, he notes that while Islam is a foreign religion that was brought into Iran and naturalized, the Baha'i religion "is the last of five *purely Persian* religious movements in the Persian Empire" (the other four being Zoroastrianism, Mithraism, Manichaeism, and Mazdakism). The report goes on to speak with admiration of the Baha'i religion's embrace of science and its ideals of internationalism, complete equality, pacifism (except for just wars), capitalism, and belief that religion is designed to serve the common good (rather than vice versa). Moreover, in assessing character traits, the report makes mention of the intelligence and efficiency of the Baha'is and "the high moral qualities and ethical standards of the Bahais in contrast with the orthodox Mohammedans." The report concludes that Islam has failed in Iran and that "Bahatism, in which there are signs of a Protestant Reformation, and which after all is of purely Persian origin, may prove itself to be the best solution under the circumstances."¹⁶

The repeated use of "purely Persian" in discussing the possible future role of the Baha'is was based on the author's skepticism that Shi'ism could serve as an adequate foundation for nationalism, given its foreign origin. The remaining options were to embrace a recent movement of purely Persian origin (i.e. the Baha'i Faith), or attempt a revival of the pre-Islamic Persian past. Of course, it was the latter option that was to be

¹⁶ Murray, "A consideration of the Bahai Religion," pp. 6-15.

later embraced by Reza Shah and his son. The notion that Shi'ism could serve as the basis of national identity was not even entertained.

“To fish in troubled waters”

Towards the end of the Qajar period, Baha'is became increasingly resented not only for their heretical beliefs, but also for their disproportionate employment by foreigners in Iran, and the subsequent intervention of these foreign powers on their behalf. With the occupation of Iran during the First World War, there was an intense need for highly-skilled local collaboration. Baha'is were a natural fit because their pacifism, internationalism, and comparatively high rates of literacy made them uniquely suited to work with Western powers. Moreover, because of the ongoing and occasionally violent bouts of anti-Baha'ism in Iran, they were in need of powerful friends, and this need could be used as leverage with which to solicit loyalty to their defenders. This disproportionate hiring of Baha'is, beginning in the final years of the Qajar period, formed the kernel of later conspiracy theories, such as the forged *Political Confessions of Prince Dolgorouki*, which greatly exaggerated the link between the Baha'is and foreign powers, and projected it backwards, to the religion's origins in the previous century, as part of a fantastical conspiracy.¹⁷ In reality, the employment of Baha'is was a largely post-World War I development, and was not that dramatic. Baha'is were disproportionately employed, but in mundane office work and not national sedition. They did receive special assistance because of their social capital, but this was directed mostly at protecting themselves from persecution.

¹⁷ For information on this forgery, see Yazdani, “I'tirāfāt-i Dolgoruki.”

At the British consulate in Shiraz, for example, it was noted, in 1917, that at least a half dozen employees or close contacts were Baha'is, including the chairman of that city's Baha'i Assembly. The extent of dependence on Baha'i collaboration was such that the British had to warn their Shiraz consulate of the dangers this posed vis-à-vis the Muslim population, only to receive a defensive response from the consul, saying: "I am quite alive to the necessity of avoiding the appearance of making the Consulate the headquarters of [Baha'ism]."¹⁸

By 1921, the relationship between the British and the Baha'is had matured to the point where it was not unusual for Baha'i Spiritual Assemblies to write British officers to ask for assistance with protection, safe transport, employment, and even help in removing government appointees believed to be anti-Baha'i. For example, when Mirza Habibullah Khan and Mirza Ashraf Khan were fired from the Ministry of Public Information due to their Baha'i religion, the Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of Tehran appealed to the British for help. Due to their intercession, the two individuals were able to secure new government appointments in Bushehr, as well as letters from the British facilitating their easy movement.¹⁹

Also in 1921, in Sultanabad, there were plans for anti-Baha'i agitation during the celebration of the Imam Mahdi's birthday, which fell during the Baha'i holy period of *Rezvan*. A similar anti-Baha'i episode the preceding year had resulted in a "disgraceful fiasco" with some "regrettable incidents," but in 1921 the British were determined to make sure that local authorities took "energetic measures" to prevent a repeat of such activity. Baha'is followed British instructions and kept a low profile, keeping their stores

¹⁸ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1159; TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1323, 1921, Vol. II, Baha'is 1, January 13, 1917 and Baha'is 2, January 15, 1917.

¹⁹ TNAPRO, FO 248 / 1323, 1921, Vol. II., "Baha'i" section, January 12, 1921; and January 4, 1921.

closed during the most dangerous period. Meanwhile, upon British instructions, the governor had all roads patrolled by the gendarmerie, whose leader was given “definite instructions” regarding preventing the development of unruly crowds. The governor himself was compelled to take to the streets with his private guard to ensure that all measures were carried out. Despite the success of these protective measures, the Baha’is still tried to have the British force the removal of the main agitators against them.²⁰

Also in 1921, in Shiraz, Sheikh Jafar attacked the Baha’i monopoly over the local postal service, leading to violent anti-Baha’i attacks. The British note that the Persian authorities intended to wait until the situation quieted and then turn the other clerics against Sheikh Jafar and have him arrested and deported, along with his entourage. They also note that the Baha’is had been aggressively proselytizing and that a third of Shiraz was supposedly Baha’i. This latter claim is, of course, not accurate but indicates that a very large percentage of those Iranians with whom the British interacted regularly were Baha’i. This figure of one-third was said to include the many Baha’is in the SPR (South Persia Rifles), who were not necessarily from the area but were merely stationed there. The large number of Baha’is in the SPR suggests that many Baha’is were taking advantage of the equalizing potential of military enrollment.

In the campaign against Baha’i control of mail services in Shiraz, the postmaster was severely beaten and was subsequently exiled from the city for his own protection and to prevent further disruption. The removal of the postmaster emboldened the anti-Baha’i activists and placed the lives of other Baha’i postal workers in danger. The Baha’i Assembly in Tehran alerted the British that “immediate suppressive steps are extremely necessary for averting the pending danger.” The British acted on this appeal and the

²⁰ Ibid., April 23, 1921; April 25, 1921.

Shiraz consulate later reported that “agitation has been quietly struck down for the last ten days.” The consulate, however, placed some blame on the Baha’is themselves for their “recent intensive propaganda missionaries,” and claimed that it was reasonable to require the main proselytizers to leave. The Baha’i postmaster was ostensibly transferred for his own protection, but in reality this “timorous individual” was transferred for “utilizing the Post Office for propaganda.” In any case, the British were able to further calm the Shiraz unrest upon the request of Munshi, a consulate employee who was also the chairman of the city’s Baha’i Spiritual Assembly.²¹

The director of posts from Borujerd, Mirza Abu Talib Khan Bashir-i-Humayun, was recruited to replace the exiled Baha’i postmaster, but the Baha’is again appealed to the British. They argued that this man should be denied the position on the grounds that he was Muslim and was ill-disposed towards the Baha’i employees at the post office and this “will thus result in disorder detrimental to the administration of Fars.” The Baha’i Assembly claimed that the majority of the postal employees were Baha’is the British noted that this was an understatement and that all twelve postal employees were Baha’i. In response to Baha’i protests of the new appointment, the Director General of the postal system replied that the new postmaster was already on his way and that the Baha’i charges were baseless, since this replacement was specifically chosen because he was *not* fanatical, and this choice was designed to calm the waters by replacing the outgoing Baha’i postmaster with a new one who would be Muslim, but who would not be fanatical and who would not revive the controversy over the Baha’i monopoly, since he had been given clear instructions vis-à-vis his Baha’i employees. In response to these remarks, the Shiraz consulate took the side of the Baha’is, and expressed the view that an ill-disposed

²¹ Ibid., Baha’is 24-25.

postmaster would attempt to remove the all-Baha'i staff and again revive the controversy. They suggested that the Muslim appointee from Borujerd be discharged on a pretext and that the new postmaster should be Bashir al-Sultan, a fellow Baha'i.²²

The Baha'i Assembly in Tehran wrote to express its deep gratitude for British assistance with the Shiraz situation and to ask for further assistance in other regions, such as Isfahan, where elements in the Department of Education were campaigning for the removal of Baha'is from government employment and agitating for action against the Baha'is during the holy month of Moharram. The British responded to this request and intervened as they had in Sultanabad and elsewhere. They instructed the governor-general to take precautionary measures and to reprimand anti-Baha'i employees for utilizing their position for "mischief making."²³

In the same period, the Baha'is wrote and asked for assistance transferring money to their headquarters in British Palestine, saying that bank drafts were not currently available, but that they needed to transfer 4000 pounds immediately, and 50,000 Tomans annually. Although the request was eventually denied, the officer making the case for approving this request argues that the request should be approved, as the "Behais are very numerous and ever increasing in Persia... [and are] an influential and well-disposed section of the people." This note indicates recognition by local British officers of the mutually beneficial nature of their relationship with the Baha'is, and how a policy of accommodation served British interests.²⁴

In Yazd, anti-Baha'i agitation also prompted British action. Treadwell sent a telegraph to Tehran indicating that Baha'is were being beaten, denied access to public

²² Ibid. Baha'is 1, January 13, 1917; Baha'is 2, January 15, 1917; Baha'is 31-32.

²³ Ibid., Baha'is 26.

²⁴ Ibid., Baha'is 30, 33.

baths, and were facing the threat of a boycott. He went on to “earnestly beg” that preventative steps again be authorized to protect the Baha’is. This concern prompted the following margin note:

These anti-Bahai movements are getting disquieting. It is always necessary to bear in mind that such movements are hardly ever mainly religious. The Persians are too fundamentally political to be religiously fanatical in the genuine way. But fanaticism serves as a useful pretext for the more disorderly elements to fish in troubled waters. If such fanatical movements are not curbed, their scope quickly widens beyond purely religious matters, to the detriment of public order and European interests in the country.²⁵

Although this assessment is excessively dismissive of religious motivation, it correctly points out the political undercurrents of these supposedly spontaneous expressions of religious fanaticism. As the uncertainty of the interregnum between the Qajar and Pahlavi dynasties increased, the boldness of anti-minority violence increased, as did its overt political implications.

The Fountain

In the months preceding the attack on Vice Consul Imbrie, the Saqa Khaneh fountain in central Tehran became the “storm center” of an anti-Baha’i movement that had compiled a list of about a thousand Baha’is, who were to be massacred on Ashura (August 12, 1924). This particular fountain gained notoriety because of reports of its miraculous ability to heal the Shi’ite faithful of their ailments while also inflicting blindness on heretical Baha’is. One story involved a Baha’i man being struck blind after saying that he would not give coins at the fountain in the name of Ali, but would give any amount in

²⁵ Ibid., Baha’is 35.

the name of Abdu'l-Baha (the son of the Baha'i prophet).²⁶ As word of the Saqa Khaneh's power spread, many began to come from great distances, some even carried on stretchers. The spot developed into a rallying point for those opposed to the Baha'i heresy. As growing crowds came to be healed, the fountain was, conveniently, "poisoned" and its miraculous powers could therefore not be tested by the faithful pilgrims. The inability of the fountain to heal the pilgrims was blamed on the Baha'is, who were said to be behind the poisoning.²⁷

Imbrie was curious about the Saqa Khaneh in part because of his involvement in opposing the anti-Baha'i agitation and in part because he had been given a camera by *National Geographic* with which to take photos of interesting subjects. Imbrie and Seymour approached the spectacle at the fountain with their camera, but there is no agreement in the available sources about what exactly happened after that. There is, however, general agreement that there was opposition to the taking of photographs followed shortly thereafter by accusations that Imbrie and Seymour were Baha'is and guilty of poisoning the sacred fountain. Some sources claim that Imbrie and Seymour took pictures despite being warned not to, while others claim that the camera was not used and was immediately put away after it was found objectionable, but that the sounds made while closing the camera were mistaken for the sounds of photographs being taken.²⁸ The claim that the photographing of unveiled women at the fountain was the cause of the attack was promoted by the Iranian government, which initially tried to

²⁶ In other versions of the story, the Baha'i was blinded for refusing to give money to a beggar at the fountain, or for saying that he would give a small amount for a Muslim charity but a great deal for a Baha'i charity.

²⁷ NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 7 / 1 / 1, vol. 153, pp. 50, 274; *The Baghdad Times*, July 24, 1924; *The New York Times*, July 24, 1924 .

²⁸ For numerous, conflicting eyewitness depositions, see NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 7 / 1 / 1, vol. 153, pp. 259-300.

frame the attack in terms of an affront to male honor brought on by cultural misunderstanding. Other sources dismiss this claim, since there would not have been uncovered women at this conservative rallying site.

There is also a strong possibility that, if photos were taken, there were no women in the pictures and the shots were, instead, obtained to further document the anti-Baha'i agitation in Iran. The leaders of this movement were doubtless familiar with Imbrie and his previous involvement with protecting Dr. Moody, and knew that any photographs he took would likely be used against them in the foreign press in order to make them look fanatical, and bring pressure on the government to prevent the anti-Baha'i massacre planned for Moharram. In any event, despite the official framing of the issue in terms of male honor, it was the claim that the two Americans were really Baha'is and had poisoned the fountain that prompted the mob's advance and the anger of the masses, most of whom arrived on the scene well after the camera had been put away.

"I Thought It Was a Dog of a Baha'i"

Imbrie and Seymour fled the scene in a carriage while being pursued by a crowd led by clerics and pelted with stones from rooftops along the route. Although the attack upon Imbrie and Seymour "lasted about half an hour, at a spot within a stone's throw of both the Police Headquarters and the Kossak Khaneh, where both police and military reserves were at hand, no attempt was made to intimidate the mob."²⁹ Instead, the Americans' cries for help were ignored and, to their disbelief, soldiers and policemen actually joined the mob attacking them.

²⁹ Murray, "Report," p. 3.

Despite the driver's best efforts, the fleeing carriage was stopped and Imbrie and Seymour were dragged out and brutally assaulted by civilians, police, and soldiers until other police officers finally intervened and, without using force,³⁰ were able to bring the two injured men to a nearby police infirmary. By this point the crowd, numbering anywhere from five hundred to several thousand, was unwilling to disperse and instead forced its way into the infirmary and—believing that Seymour had already died—fell upon Imbrie, assaulting him with stones and swords until they were sure that he was dead, his scalp severed from his skull.³¹

Later, government propaganda would put forward the claim that “fanatics” were responsible and that several policemen died protecting the Americans. This claim was retracted after it failed to stand up to scrutiny, and the Persian government later admitted that the dead policemen that they had produced in support of this story were actually policemen who had died from unrelated events, and that the police and military did, in fact, participate in the attacks, with only a handful of policemen taking timid steps to defend the two Americans.³² In fact, the most serious wounds were made by military sabers.³³

There is no doubt that the Police and Cossack troops in the mob knew of Imbrie's identity. He was wearing his official insignias; he made his identity known to the nearby police and military troops earlier that same day; and he repeatedly identified himself as an American diplomat, as confirmed by both Seymour and other eyewitnesses. In spite

³⁰ As discussed above, Reza Khan had ordered that force not be used against religious crowds.

³¹ NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 7 / 1 / 1, vol. 153, p. 255; Murray, “Report,” p. 3.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 49.

³³ *The Baghdad Times*, July 24, 1924.

of this, he was given no quarter. Rather, Imbrie's identity served to further endanger his position.

Imbrie's previous use of a Baha'i-led force to protect Moody had created a situation in which the police and soldiers on the scene faced a dilemma. If they were to assist Imbrie, they ran the risk of being tainted as Baha'is themselves and having the mob turn against them as well. Moreover, standing up against the crowd was suicidal, as Reza Shah had recently made it clear that clerical demonstrations were not to be fired upon, as this would only further assist clerical efforts to undermine him. Given the spontaneous nature of the attack, and the choice between a series of unpalatable options, it is not difficult to understand why many officers on the scene chose to join rather than oppose the crowd.

Investigation and Retribution

When Imbrie's body was examined, the extent of the brutality of the attack was uncovered and reported. This led to not only an American desire for restitution, but to American investors' fear of Iranian instability and anti-Americanism. The autopsy revealed: a severed scalp; over twenty head wounds, most of which penetrated the scalp; extensive epicranial hemorrhages "in every direction;" numerous fractures; missing teeth; broken ribs; a burst upper lip; scrotal trauma; and dozens of contusions and lacerations such that "the contusions over the body and limbs generally were so numerous or extensive that they ran into one another, and it was impossible to determine how many

there actually were."³⁴ Imbrie's body was returned home with full military honors and buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

His widow and the Department of State pressed for those responsible to be brought to justice. Although the mob was said to have been led by a cleric, the majority of the eyewitnesses as well as the autopsy indicate that the police and soldiers among the crowd were those most directly engaged in the assault. To the chagrin of American officials, most of the military officers involved were not held to account and, at most, received demotions for negligence or disobedience and other nominal penalties. Senior ulama were also spared. Instead, several poor, ill-connected individuals from among the assailants received beatings or short periods in jail, while three were put forward as the scapegoats to face execution for the murder: Private Morteza (for inciting the mob to murder and ignoring the desist orders supposedly made by his senior officers), Sayyed Hussein (a civilian who had apparently hit Imbrie at one point and who had broken open the entrance to the police hospital), and Ali (a fourteen-year-old street youth who supposedly confessed to throwing a stone at Imbrie while he lay in the hospital). None of these three were the leaders of the mob or the ones that struck the killing blows, but they were the individuals whom the Persian government was willing to execute to satisfy American pressure. Meanwhile, those actually responsible faced demotions, one to three months in jail, and 50-300 lashes, if they were punished at all.³⁵

The plan for Hussein, Morteza, and Ali to take the blame satisfied neither side and became a drawn-out ordeal. Since executing those actually responsible was not on the table, American officials were insistent that the three who were facing execution all be

³⁴ NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 7 / 1 / 1, vol. 153, pp. 256-57.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 41, 60-62, 76-78, 86-90.

killed, and in an expedient fashion, to serve as an example. The Persian authorities, however, were finding the executions exceedingly unpopular within Iran and tried to stall the proceedings or reduce the sentences. The first delay occurred in order to wait for the end of Moharram, but after this Reza Khan continued to stall due to the unpopularity of the planned executions. Private Morteza was not executed until October 2, and even then he was technically executed for disobeying orders, not murder. After his execution, the Persian authorities made the case that the other two should not be executed on the grounds that it is against Islam to execute many for the death of one, and that Ali was a child.³⁶

The Americans rejected these arguments. They consulted their own Islamic experts to debunk these religious objections. Later, they discovered that Reza Khan had actually never consulted any religious experts and that he would not do this, as it would be a concession of clerical authority. The claim that Ali was too young to be executed was also dismissed, on the grounds that Persians often don't really know their true ages and that it is possible that the boy might be seventeen or even eighteen and, in any case, an "Oriental" adolescent is more mature than his Occidental counterpart and, culturally, the age of maturity was fifteen in Iran. Popular opposition to the execution of this child was coldly dismissed as irrelevant since the masses were "biased." Ali was not the only child of questionable guilt punished as a result of the ongoing American pressure: Jafar, seventeen, received two months in prison and a hundred lashes; Ismail, a sixteen-year-old fruit seller, received four months and a hundred lashes; and Hussein, only twelve, received two months in prison and fifty lashes.³⁷

³⁶ Ibid., pp. 97, 101-02.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 90, 103-09, 121.

American pressure and investigation resulted in an ever-growing list of those involved in the attack, and pressure for their harsh punishment. Even one of the few police officers who had actually tried to *protect* Imbrie and Seymour was thrown in jail because he did not fire on the crowd (in obedience to an earlier edict from Reza Khan not to fire on clerical protests).³⁸ Eventually, Reza Khan gave in to American pressure and closed the matter by having Ali and the sayyed executed on November 1, 1924.³⁹

The “Hidden Hand”

The executions were seen as tangential to the question of actual culpability. Within Iran, there was widespread speculation about the British “hidden hand” that directed the mob in order to manipulate them “like puppets,” and about the likely motivations behind this orchestration. Few Iranians shared the willingness of the Americans, to credit “fanaticism” or “savagery” as the driving force behind the attacks. Most speculation centered on British sponsorship of the attacks in order to ruin the oil negotiations with Sinclair Oil, an American firm. This speculation was based on more than just the timing of the attacks. For example, when Imbrie’s wife came to see her husband’s body she was initially turned away because the hospital staff mistakenly believed that Imbrie was actually Ralph Soper, the Sinclair oil representative. This confusion over identity was used to support the widespread speculation that the murder was intended to scare away Sinclair oil and to protect British oil interests.⁴⁰ The possibility of mistaken identity is unlikely, however, due to the numerous eyewitness accounts that claim that the two American victims and their Armenian employees repeatedly identified Imbrie as the

³⁸ Ibid., p. 88.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 148.

⁴⁰ Murray, “Report,” p. 4.

American Consul, to no avail. The crowd's focus on Imbrie, while virtually ignoring Seymour, further diminishes the likelihood that the attack was intended for a representative of American oil interests. Eyewitness accounts affirm that the mob was informed as to the identity of Imbrie and that they proceeded regardless, due to their belief that he was really a Baha'i.⁴¹

Nevertheless, the popular gossip and underground press credited the hidden hand of the British (and in some cases the Russians) for the attack as part of the "oil war," claiming that the British again worked through their old allies the ulama in order to manipulate the "simple-minded fools" and scare away the proposed American investment through manufactured fanaticism, and that the "so-called" Saqa Khaneh Movement "had the earmarks from the beginning of an artificially inspired movement... in order to create disorder for the Government."⁴²

Reza Khan dismissed Russian involvement and did not believe the British to be directly responsible for the specific attack on Imbrie, but he did share the opinion that the British were undoubtedly the sponsors of the anti-Baha'i clerical agitation based at the "miracle" spring, with the aim of embarrassing him and fomenting disorder to discourage American investment. The Persian authorities went so far as to try to arrest Mostafa Khan, the Anglo-Persian representative, in connection with Imbrie's murder. Khan had been deeply involved in bribing the majles and engaging in other efforts to prevent the oil deal with the Americans, and it was speculated that he was involved in sponsoring the

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 3-4.

⁴² Ibid., p. 12; NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 7 / 1 / 1, Vol. 153, pp. 321-27.

“fanatical” movement which eventually attacked Imbrie. Khan’s arrest was blocked by British pressure, and the matter was dropped⁴³

It was, in any case, the ulama that bore the brunt of Reza Khan’s anger over the murder, the resulting diplomatic problems, and the collapsed hopes of American investment. He was forced to declare martial law, discipline his troops, pay hundreds of thousands of dollars in restitution to both Imbrie’s widow and the American government, and to demote, flog, imprison, or execute scapegoats to satisfy American calls for retribution. The entire episode proved a drain and a distraction, highlighting the continued power of the traditional elite and effectively killing what hope remained of breaking away from the British or pursuing a republic.

“Our martyr”: The Americanization of the Baha’i Problem

In one of his reports to the State Department about the Imbrie murder, W. Smith Murray notes that the Baha’is of Tehran repeatedly told him that they considered Imbrie to be a martyr for their cause. They believed that he died protecting the Baha’is from the Saqa Khaneh Movement and that the only reason that the Moharram massacre was avoided was the clerical crackdown and close scrutiny that followed Imbrie’s murder. They believed that his death saved the lives of hundreds. “He was our martyr,” Dr. Moody said, “he sacrificed his life for us!”⁴⁴ Ali Akbar Rohani, writing on behalf of the national administrative council of the Iranian Baha’is, wrote:

The blood of this glorious man blended with that of many thousands of Baha’i martyrs, who sacrificed their lives with insupportable tortures and under tyrannical claws for the sake of universal peace and redemption...for centuries

⁴³ Murray, “Report,” pp. 4-5.

⁴⁴ *The New York Times*, January 19, 1925.

this event will never be forgotten! ...The seed of permanent affection and sincerity between these two nations has been watered by the blood of this victim.⁴⁵

The crackdown over Imbrie's murder produced a brief respite in anti-Baha'i violence. This lull did not last long, but the incident did have a profound influence on the contours of anti-Baha'i agitation in the decades that followed. The episode created, in American diplomatic memory, the idea that the politicization of the ulama was a threat to order and progress and that their fetishistic obsession with the Baha'i minority now had potentially disastrous foreign policy implications.

The ghosts of the Imbrie incident can be seen, for example, in a May 1926 letter from the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States and Canada to Reza Shah, urging an end to Baha'i persecutions in Jahrom. In this small provincial town near Shiraz, many Baha'is were wounded, twenty houses looted or burned, and eight Baha'is tortured and killed. Among the dead was a child cut into pieces and Baha'i women murdered "in the most shameful manner." As tragic as this provincial incident was, what is relevant for our study is the manner in which the appeal was staged. It was the American Baha'is whose lobbying efforts were used on the Shah, rather than Iranian believers, and the appeal was made by making strong reference to the Imbrie incident and drawing a thread connecting the fanaticism that resulted in Imbrie's death with the fanaticism on display in Jahrom. Horace Holley, writing on behalf of the Assembly, lavishes praise on the Shah and his reforms and claims that Baha'is share the Shah's progressive and hopeful vision of the world, while in contrast the ulama took joy in

⁴⁵ NACPM, RG 84 / 350 / 7 / 1 / 1, vol. 153, pp. 766-67.

murder and represented only anarchy, retrogression, and obstacles to Iran's progress.⁴⁶

The memory of Imbrie is invoked to draw a rhetorical line in the sand, on one side of which Holley placed the Baha'is, the Americans, and a progressive future for Iran, while on the other side he placed the ulama, hopelessness, and a slide back to medievalism.

The Shah is challenged to choose sides.

The legacy of the Imbrie episode, and other less dramatic interventions, including those by the British on behalf of their Baha'i employees, served to create a sense that the welfare of Iran's Baha'i population was no longer a purely domestic concern. The possibility of foreign intervention over Baha'ism was used by the Baha'is to lobby for better treatment, as Holley was doing by invoking Imbrie, and was used by their enemies to promote the idea that Baha'ism was "foreign."

In the anti-Baha'i pogrom of 1955, the diplomatic record contains hundreds of references to the Imbrie affair, and there was constant speculation in educated Iranian circles that the pogrom of 1955, like the attacks on Imbrie, were the result of clerical agitation sponsored by the British to scare away American involvement in Iran and to retain Britain's place as the preeminent Power exerting influence over Iran. This constant invocation of Imbrie, more than a generation later, speaks to the importance of the episode in the history of American involvement in Iran.

⁴⁶ Ibid., vol. 79, 840.1 - Social Matters, NSA to Reza Shah, May 12, 1926, and NSA to Secretary of State, November 5, 1926.

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