The Babi Uprising in Zanjan

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On 5 May 1850 the Babis of Zanjan rose in arms against the Qajar governor of the town. Led by a charismatic cleric known as Hujjat-i Zanjani, two thousand Babi fighters with their families held part of the town against a much larger government army. Nine months later, when the army captured the last ruined houses held by the Babis, fewer than a hundred Babi fighters survived to face execution.

There is never a neat answer to the question of why a historical event occurred, and the question is that much harder to answer when the information is in fundamental ways incomplete and when the participants themselves differed deeply about the meaning of the event. There were two other major Babi revolts—Mazandaran in 1848-49 and Nayriz in 1850—and at least four other instances where Babi uprisings might have been expected: Shiraz, Qazvin, and Isfahan in 1846, and Tehran in 1852. There were, of course, many urban disturbances of various sizes in Iran in this general period that did not involve Babis. For the question of causation to be usefully answered, we must ask why there were Babi revolts at all, why they happened in some places and not in others, and why they differed in the different places. What chain of events could lead to such violence in a small town? How were the Babis able to coalesce into a fighting force effective enough to hold off regular troops far superior to them in numbers and equipment? What was there in the pre-existing social, economic, and political structure that allowed the town to divide so suddenly and totally? What were the ideas that shaped the actions of the various parties—for there were at least five major groups playing active roles in the siege: the Babis, the Zanjan clerical establishment, the government, the regular army, and the local levies. The actions of each group were shaped by its political interests, by its religious opinions and conceptual structures, and by the events as they unfolded. Finally, what were the effects of the battle—on the Babis, in Zanjan and elsewhere, on the town, on the government, and on the Shi`ite religious establishment?

Note: I use the term "revolt" for convenience, though it does not exactly fit; see MacEoin, "Holy War," 94. The reader can in the end judge for himself what term fits best.

The Babis and Zanjan

Founded in 1844 by a young merchant of Shiraz, the Babi movement spread rapidly in Iran and the Shi`ite shrine cities of Iraq. Its founder, Sayyid `Ali-Muhammad, more generally known as the Bab ("Gate"), claimed divine authority within the Shi`ite belief system. His claims aroused opposition first from Shi`ite religious leaders and later from the Iranian government. Usually the converts were isolated individuals, drawn for the most part from among the Shaykhis, an esoteric school of Twelver Shi`ism. In a few places, however, the conversion of a local leader led to the wholesale conversion of his followers. One such place was Zanjan, where a charismatic preacher became a Babi, followed by several thousand of his supporters. The Bab himself was imprisoned in Azerbaijan in 1847. Open fighting occurred for the first time in 1848, when several hundred Babis traveling west from Khorasan were besieged in an improvised fort in Mazandaran. Three more sieges followed—in Zanjan and twice in Nayriz in Fars. The Bab was executed in 1850, and in 1852 most of the remaining leaders of the movement were killed, following an attempt by a group of Babis to assassinate the Shah. By the end of his life the Bab had openly claimed prophethood, had abrogated Islamic law and promulgated a system of Babi law, and thus had established a separate religion distinct from Islam. The Babi religion was a dramatic instance of the revolutionary tradition in Iranian religion and the last major religious movement in Iran not shaped by the challenge of the West. (Amanat, Resurrection.)

Zanjan is a little town halfway between Tehran and Tabriz in the north of Iran, the capital of the small province formerly known as Khamsa and now called Zanjan. It is important only for the roads that meet there: the Tehran-Tabriz highway and lesser tracks leading across the mountains to the north and south. The population of Zanjan province is mixed, the largest part being from the Turkic Afshar tribe. In the middle of the nineteenth century Zanjan was a walled city of perhaps 8,000 people.

There exists a considerable amount of information about the siege of Zanjan. It was by far the largest of the battles between the Babis and government troops, involving about two thousand Babi fighters and twenty thousand government troops and irregulars. Moreover, the highway between Tehran and Tabriz, one of the most important roads of the kingdom, passed through the Babi positions, so the affair could scarcely be ignored. There are seven or eight Babi and Baha’i accounts, chapters in the official histories of the time, and references in contemporary sources. The chronology and government views can be discerned from the official histories, especially Sipihr, while the Babis’ tactics and many anecdotes are preserved in the Babi and Bahá'í chronicles. Thus the information is rather good for an event of this sort in nineteenth century Iran.

Note: Of the Babi primary sources, two stand out: Tarikh-i Waqayi`-i Zanjan by Mirza Husayn-i Zanjani, a Baha'i commissioned by the Baha'i leader Bahaullah in about 1880 to write an objective report on the siege, and the interpolation in the London manuscript of the New History of the Bab (Hamadani, New History, 139–68), containing an account of the fighting based on information from a certain Haydar Big, son of Din-Muhammad, Hujjat's military commander. The other notable Babi and Baha'i accounts are Nabil, a bowdlerized version of Zanjani, Waqayi`, with added information obtained from Zanjan Baha'is in the 1860s; `Abd al-Ahad, "Personal Reminiscences, the memoir of an Azali who had been a child during the siege; the narrative of `Abd al-Ahad's brother, Aqa Naqd-`Ali, quoted in Nicolas, Ali Mohammed, 332, 338–40, which seems now to be lost. Mazandarani, Zuhur al-Haqq, 3:175–85, contains biographies of the leading Babis of Zanjan, especially Hujjat, with information not available elsewhere.

The account in Sipihr, Nasikh, the official history, seems to have been written from military dispatches. Hidayat, Rawdat al-Safa, is unreliable. Accounts by Gobineau, I`tidad al-Saltana, and most later Muslim writers are based on Sipihr. Contemporary diplomatic dispatches are quoted or summarized in Momen, Babi, 114–27. A petition against Hujjat is reproduced and edited in Ittila`at.

Two additional important sources exist to which I was refused access. The first are the papers of Sayyid Mirza Ab al-Qasim Zanjani, known as "Sayyid-i Mujtahid," a leader of the Zanjan clergy during this period, including several refutations of the Babis. They are in the hands of one of his descendants. The second is the chronicle of the siege in the second volume of Mazanadarani's Zuhur al-Haqq, held at the Baha'i World Center.

Untangling the religious issues poses special problems. The religious views of the Babis, who had little access to the Bab's writings, were disparate and in rapid flux during this period. In the case of Zanjan the situation is made more difficult by the fact that almost nothing written by Hujjat during his Babi period survives. By the time the Babi and Baha'i chronicles were written a generation later, the religious situation had changed profoundly and the writers often no longer understood what the Babis of Zanjan had believed. The Muslim chroniclers, of course, had little accurate information about the religious views of the Babis.

Pre-Babi religious disputes in Zanjan

Among the respected `ulama of Zanjan in the early nineteenth century was Akhund Mulla `Abd al-Rahim. He was in charge of a mosque and was esteemed among the people for his piety, asceticism, and learning. Some went so far as to attribute miracles to him. He had a son named Muhammad-`Ali, born about 1812. The boy showed promise, so his father sent him to the shrine-cities of Najaf and Karbala in Iraq, where he studied with Sharif al-`Ulama Mazandarani, a prominent teacher of the time. His studies were cut short by the death of his teacher and the closing of the seminaries in the epidemic of 1831, so he

returned to Iran and settled in Hamadan. When his father died, a delegation from Zanjan came to the young man and asked him to assume his father's position. He went home and began preaching in his father's old mosque.

Note: Babi and non-Babi sources agree about his character and position. See Zanjani, Waqayi`, 3-4; Nabil, 529; `Abd al-Ahad, "Reminiscences," 770; Ittila`at. On his return see Nabil 529. Hidayat, Rawdat, 10:447-48. Sipihr, Nasikh, 3:89. Only Zanjani, Waqayi`, 3–4, and Nabil, 529–30, mention the interlude in Hamadan, which Nabil attributes to his father's warning of enemies in Zanjan. If the latter is the case, it must be due to them both being Akhbaris (see below).

After his return Mulla Muhammad-`Ali was given the title Hujjat al-Islam—"Proof of Islam," a common title for distinguished `ulama of the time—and was known as Hujjat-i Zanjani. He seems to have immediately come into conflict with the established `ulama of the town. Jealousy was certainly part of it. He was an eloquent, fiery, and attractive speaker and quickly acquired a large following. "The bazaar of the other `ulama emptied of customers." (Zanjani, Waqayi`, 4–5.) Beneath the familiar rivalries of the `ulama, there was a religious issue, for Hujjat was, as his father had been, an Akhbari. (Hamadani, New History, 135. Nabil, 178. Zanjani, Waqayi`, 3.) The Akhbaris had opposed the increasing dominance of a rationalism in jurisprudence. They took their name from their greater reliance on the traditions (akhbar) of the imams. Their rivals were known as Usulis, from their reliance on rational principles (usul). The Usulis held that in the absence of the imam, those sufficiently learned in the Law could decide some legal questions on the basis of their own judgment (ijtihad) when there was no other adequate basis for decision. Such individuals were known as mujtahids. Those not possessing such knowledge were required to follow the judgment of a mujtahid and were called muqallid, "obedient." This was the basis of the authority of the Usuli hierarchy. The Akhbaris denied that anyone apart from the imam was authorized to exercise such independent judgment. The controversy had preoccupied the Shi`ite `ulama for much of the eighteenth century and by the beginning of the nineteenth had ended with the complete defeat of the Akhbaris. From that time the claims of the `ulama to worldly authority rose steadily. (For a general discussion, see Momen, Introduction, 117–18, 222–25.) Hujjat challenged those claims.

He was a man of independent mind, noted for extreme originality and freedom from all forms of traditional restraint. He denounced the whole hierarchy of the ecclesiastical leaders of his country, from the Abvab-i Arba`a [Literally, the Four Gates—the four men who for nearly seventy years after the disappearance of the last imam in 874 had claimed to be in communication with him.] down to the humblest mulla among his contemporaries. He despised their character, deplored their degeneracy, and expatiated upon their vices. (Nabil, 178.)

His conflict with the other `ulama of the town during these years as an Akhbari preacher may be summarized—from the Babi point of view—as follows:

1. He denied the authority of the mujtahids and by extension that of the conventional Shi'ite hierarchy.

2. He denounced the character of the other `ulama.

3. He stopped certain abuses tolerated by the `ulama, which they had excused with legal hairsplitting.

4. He issued legal rulings of his own sharply at variance with convention.

5. He imposed extra observances on his own followers.

6. He aroused the jealousy of the other `ulama because of his ready argument, his eloquence, and his large personal following.

That he challenged the basis of the legitimacy of the clergy is shown by a contemporary document, a petition denouncing Hujjat written in 1847. Though written after he became a Babi, the accusations reflect his earlier preaching. One of those signing the petition wrote:

Akhund Mulla Muhammad-`Ali [Hujjat]. . . went up onto the pulpit. . . and in the course of the sermon cursed the whole body of Twelver `ulama and denied ijtihad and taqlid. As evidence for his denial of mujtahids—may God multiply their peers!—he cited the holy verse, "Indeed your master is God and His Messenger and those possessing authority among you.". . . [He continued,] "Look! In which sura, in which verse does the Most Holy mention the mujtahid? `There is nothing moist or wet but is in an evident book.' If the mujtahids were the guides in religion, God would surely have mentioned it."

Others writing in this petition also mention his denial of the authority of the mujtahids and his habit of denouncing the `ulama from the pulpit. The Baha'i sources do not mention his denial of ijtihad and taqlid, probably because they did not know the theological point at issue.

The Babi and Baha'i historians particularly mention how he acted against violations of morality excused through recourse to legal loopholes. There was, for example, an old caravansary that had become a house of temporary marriage (a form of legalized prostitution peculiar to Shi`ism). A mulla legalized the temporary marriages, thus preventing the brief dalliances from being adultery, and the local clergy shared in the profits. Hujjat closed this institution. He also closed the local wine shops, which others considered licit because they were nominally owned by Christians. He is also said to have criticized the `ulama for taking bribes. (Zanjani, Waqayi', p 4-5. `Abd al-Ahad, "Reminiscences," 770, 786.)

Hujjat was notorious for his habit of issuing legal rulings sharply at variance with established practice. The most famous had to do with the determination of the month of fasting, Ramadan. Muslim months begin on the first sunset after the new moon has been seen. Since the new moon is very close to the sun, the new moon may not be seen on the expected day, and thus a given month may have twenty-nine or thirty days. Hujjat evidently had unorthodox views on the subject. Relying on a tradition that "The month of Ramadan is always full [i.e.

thirty days]" his followers were sometimes seen to be fasting on the `Id al-Fitr, the holiday marking the end of Ramadan, when fasting is prohibited. On Ramadan of 1262/1846 the outraged `ulama of Zanjan saw that his followers had stopped fasting three days before the end of Ramadan.(Sipihr, Nasikh, 3:89.)

A second area of dispute concerned ritual purity. Over the centuries the `ulama had hedged the simple act of washing before prayers with innumerable restrictions to guarantee that the prayer was not unwittingly invalidated. Hujjat seems to have denied some of the details of the laws of purity while insisting on a strict observance of the spirit. Though he required his followers to wash daily with fresh water, the deposition filed against him in 1847 mentions that "he considers encountering a Jew or an Armenian when it is raining to be pure, considers urine to be pure once it has dried, and holds that the feces of a mouse do not make [certain classes of] water impure." (Ittila`at. Zanjani, Waqayi`, 8.) The Shi`ites believed that Jews and Christians were impure and that touching their clothing when it was raining transmitted this impurity to a Muslim. Another signer of the deposition said that he considered it allowable to eat with Christians and Jews—interesting in light of the later development of Babi and Baha'i thought on the matter.

There also was a dispute about the nature of the Imam's body. A very interesting debate is recorded between Hujjat and a leading mujtahid of the town.

One day the late Sayyid-i Mujtahid was with Hujjat in a gathering. He saw the respect enjoyed by Hujjat and decided to dispute with him. He said something of this sort: "What is the condition of a person who begins in menstrual blood and who ends as a corpse?" Hujjat replied with tactful words: "First, the infant in the womb does not drink blood, but rather the essence of blood. Were it to drink blood, it would die. It must have urine and excrement as well. The blood becomes the placenta, and the essence of blood little by little becomes the baby." Sayyid-i Mujtahid said, "Then what is the state of the Prophets and Imams?" He replied, "With respect to the flesh, they are like us, but with respect to spiritual stations, they are pure in spirit and give new life to men." The argument continued in this manner and grew bitter. They began to tell lies about him, claiming that Hujjat-i Zanjani said, "The imam is like me." (Zanjani, Waqayi`, 5-6; cf. Ittila`at.)

The question at issue is how the Imam can be perpetually ritually pure if he is nurtured in the womb on blood, which is impure, and becomes impure at death. Hujjat replies that the substance of the infant is not defiled because he is not nourished on the blood as such but on the essence of the blood. The mujtahid then asks how the prophets can be born in a state of impurity, reflecting a Shi`ite tendency to attribute to the prophets and imams supernatural qualities, both spiritual and physical. Hujjat denies that the physical bodies of the prophets and imams are in any way miraculous. Certainly, this indicates a predisposition to accept a worldly eschatology like that of the Bab.

His reforms made him extremely popular. Even after his supporters built him a new mosque connected to his father's old mosque, the crowds were such that people still had to pray outside in the courtyard. (Zanjani, Waqayi`, 8. `Abd al-Ahad, 779. Nabil, 530-31.) His enemies claimed that in 1846 half the district followed his example in breaking the fast on the 27th of Ramadan.

On at least one occasion the complaints of his enemies led to his being summoned to Tehran. Apparently, however, his outspoken criticism of the `ulama amused Muhammad Shah, and he was released with honors.

Note: Zanjani, Waqayi`, 6–7. His book, Rayhanat al-Sudur, on the question of the duration of Ramadan was written for Muhammad Shah in 1843, presumably during this stay in Tehran.. Two MSS exist—Tehran Milli 898 and Tehran Sipahsalar 2536, the latter an autograph.

The conversion of Hujjat and the development of Babism in Zanjan

When news of the claims of the Bab began circulating in Iran, Hujjat sent one of his followers to investigate. The man eventually returned with a letter from the Bab. He found Hujjat preparing to begin the class he taught in his mosque every day after congregational prayers. On reading the letter Hujjat became visibly agitated. He abruptly ended the class, took off his turban, and asked for the lambskin cap of a layman to wear. He had become a Babi. There are evidently two points being made here. First, by trading his turban for the lambskin hat (kulah) of a layman, he renounced any claims to religious leadership in the face of the Bab's overwhelming authority and knowledge. Second, the hat was a symbol of a Persian's dignity. In Persian poetry, the lover is pictured as distracted and disheveled in his longing for his beloved. His disgrace in outward matters—like losing his hat—merely confirms the sincerity of his love and is thus no disgrace.

Note: The Babi accounts of Hujjat's conversion differ on details, but all mention the dramatic reception of the letter and his renunciation of the mulla's turban. See `Abd al-Ahad, "Memoir," 771–73; Zanjani, Waqayi`, 9–10; Nabil, 178–79; Hamadani, New History, 136–37. Non-Babi accounts agree that his conversion was effected through correspondence with the Bab but place it as late as 1848. See I`tidad al-Saltana, Fitna, 61; Sipihr, Nasikh, 3:89; Hidayat, Rawdat, 10:448; Diya'i, "Sanadi," 163.

Despite the likelihood that a large portion of the population of Zanjan—or at least of Hujjat's personal following—was converted to the faith of the Bab immediately, understanding of the implications of the claims of the Bab came only gradually and not all aspects of the new faith were discussed publicly. (`Abd al-Ahad, 775–76; cf. Hamadani, New History, 137.) After the first incident in the mosque, he invited the people "to embrace the new doctrine," such of them as he deemed capable of receiving it, in secret; and sometimes he would say openly, "The author of these verses claims to be the Bab, as "in the tradition" `I am the City of Knowledge, and `Ali is its Gate.'" (Hamadani, New History , 136–37.)

Another source explains:

Each person had a different idea about the Sayyid-i Bab’s cause: some understood Him to be the Gate of wilayat; some imagined Him to be the Gate of the Promised Qa’im; some souls thought Him to be the Qa’im of the House of Muhammad; a very few believed Him to be the Gate of the Most Great Manifestation—but as to His truth, they were in agreement, not dispute. (Zanjani, Waqayi`, 11.)

Hujjat began corresponding with the Bab. (`Abd al-Ahad, 775. cf. Sipihr, Nasikh 3:389, Hidayat, Rawdat 10:448, I`tidad al-Saltana, Fitna 61.) Nabil, says that in an early letter the Bab conferred on him the title Hujjat, "the proof," a title of the Bab himself, and urged him to preach the Babi teachings publicly. (Nabil, 532–33. As he progressively claimed higher stations, the Bab sometimes gave his earlier titles to his prominent followers.) A sermon attributed to Hujjat perhaps captures the religious excitement of the moment:

O people! Today the Desire of the Worlds has appeared unveiled. The Sun of Reality is dawning; the lamps of imagination and blind imitation are extinguished. Turn your faces toward His Cause, not to me, who is but one of His servants. Before His knowledge my knowledge is but a dead lamp before the Sun. Know God by God, the Sun by its light. Today the Lord of the Age is manifest, and the King of Possibilities is in existence. Today both the seeker of mystic truth and his master [muridi wa-murshidi] are engaged in the worship of idols, not worship of God. Now the people are seized by another tumult, a new madness. (Zanjani, Waqayi`, 11–13. This and some of the other sermons attributed to Hujjat may be from the lost compilation of his writings entitled Sa`iqa ("the thunderbolt"). See Ittila`at and `Abd al-Ahad, "Memoir," 825–26.)

In Zanjan, as elsewhere, the prohibition of smoking became the most visible characteristic of the Babis:

In the meeting [when he received the Bab’s letter and became a Babi] he took the chubuq in his hand and broke it. Afterwards the people imitating him smashed their chubuqs and qalyans, burned their tobacco, and ceased to sell it. . . . Hujjat informed the people of some of the commands and prohibitions of the Sayyid-i Bab. (Zanjani, Waqayi`, 11.)

There were also public recitations of the writings of the Bab. (`Abd al-Ahad, "Memoir," 775.)

Several Babi and Baha’i sources allude to a dispute concerning congregational prayer. It is considered praiseworthy in Islam to pray in congregation when possible, but it is only obligatory in the case of the Friday noon prayer. One large mosque in a town is designated as the "Friday mosque" (jami`). In many places, including nineteenth century Iran, the imam-jum`a, the cleric who led the Friday noon prayers and preached the sermon, was appointed and paid by the government and was one of the most important ecclesiastical officials in the city. It was the custom to mention the ruler in this Friday sermon, and the

omission of his name in the sermon was a symbol of rebellion. There was an additional significance in Shi`ism. The right to lead prayers and preach the Friday sermons was originally the Prophet's. When he did not lead prayers, he would appoint another in his place. After him this right belonged to the imam—imam actually means a leader of prayers. In the prolonged absence of the imam other arrangements had to be made, but should he return, the responsibility would once more devolve upon him personally.

On becoming a Babi, Hujjat discontinued leading congregational prayer because he had heard that the Bab had made it unlawful for anyone else to lead prayers without his express permission. When the Bab wrote to him telling him to lead Friday prayers, the Babis went to the Friday mosque. A scuffle ensued between the Babis and the followers of the imam-jum`a. In the end the Babis triumphed and Hujjat led prayers and delivered the sermon.

Note: Hamadani, New History, 371–72. Nabil, 533. Nicolas, Ali Mohammad, 335, following Zanjani, Waqayi`, 11, says that what happened was that Hujjat began leading the Friday form of prayer in place of the everyday prayer, following the law that the Friday prayer should supersede the daily prayer when the imam returned.

The incident indicates how threatening the Babis must have appeared to the established authorities. Existing political authority in the Shi`ite world was legitimate only in the absence of the Imam. With an Imam—how the Bab's claim was generally understood by non-believers, and in large part by believers—once more in the world, all existing institutions existed only at the sufferance of the Bab. When his orders happened to conflict with the existing order, the Babis had no hesitation in asserting his authority against king and `ulama. The authorities recognized the revolutionary implications of the claims of the Bab and acted accordingly.

Hujjat's conversion probably occurred in 1846; all the Babi sources agree that a follower of Hujjat met the Bab in Shiraz—thus between early July 1845 and September 1846. Early the following summer the Bab himself was to come to Zanjan. On 23 September 1846 the Bab had left Shiraz, expelled by the authorities. After some months in Isfahan, where he had been protected by the governor, he was summoned to Tehran. The Shah was curious to see him, and important prisoners were dealt with in the capital. Haji Mirza Aqasi, the prime minister, was a Rasputin figure—an old dervish who owed his position to his religious dominance over the Shah. It seems that he feared that the Shah might fall under the influence of the Bab, and in the end the Bab was dispatched to Aqasi's home in Maku, in the farthest northwestern corner of the country. The halt of several weeks so near the capital had allowed news of the Bab's presence and destination to spread among his followers. Though his escort was under orders to go around the main towns on their route, many Babis came out to meet the Bab. In Zanjan there was known to be a large Babi community, well organized with a resolute and capable leader who had not hesitated to cause trouble in the past. At the least public demonstrations were to be expected.

When word of the Bab's approach reached Hujjat, he sent his courier to meet the Bab in Sultaniyya, one stage east of Zanjan, offering to arrange a rescue. The man approached the camp carrying a basket of cucumbers, one of which had a message from Hujjat concealed inside. The Bab wrote in reply: "Your project accords not with expediency, for today strife is not approved. Moreover they have summoned you to Teheran, and the governor has already dispatched horsemen to set you on the road."

Note: Hamadani, New History , 137–38, 219–20, based on the account of the journey given by the chief of the escort, Muhammad Big-i Chaparchi, who became a Babi soon after. `Abd al-Ahad, "Reminiscences," 775–76.

Whatever orders the Bab may have issued, the town was in a state of high excitement when he arrived. The governor sent a note to Muhammad Big Chaparchi, the chief of the escort, saying that he wished to meet the Bab. By now crowds were coming to the caravansary The guards were doing a brisk business taking bribes to admit people to meet him. The governor became alarmed and sent two messengers in quick succession urging Muhammad Big to leave Zanjan immediately. The officer had no choice but to go farther that night.

That same night Hujjat was arrested. Two factors lay behind his arrest. The first, of course, was concern about the possibility of the rescue of the Bab and Babi disturbances in Zanjan. It must be remembered that in May 1847 this would not have had the importance for the central authorities that Babi matters were to assume in the next three years. So far disturbances involving Babis had mostly involved the arguments of the `ulama—noisy and irritating but not of major concern to the authorities. Even at Zanjan, there is little evidence that the secular authorities were particularly concerned about the Babis. From their point of view, sending Hujjat to Tehran was a logical precaution against local disturbances. That they were also concerned about the possibility of the rescue of the Bab is shown by the timing of Hujjat's arrest. (Another factor is that the Zanjanis expelled their governor at about this time; see below. The relationship between the two incidents is not clear.)

The second factor, the indignation of the `ulama, was a more serious concern. Whereas the Babi and Baha'i historians emphasize the concern of the secular authorities about the possibility of the Bab escaping, the Muslim historians emphasize Hujjat's religious disputes with the local `ulama. (I`tidad al-Saltana, Fitna, 61. Hidayat, Rawdat, 10:447. Sipihr, Nasikh, 3:89.) This interpretation is supported by a contemporary document, the petition quoted above. It was prepared by one of the `ulama and contained specific complaints of eighteen individuals, mostly Zanjan `ulama, about Hujjat's heterodoxies. It was written in Jumada I, 1263/17 April-16 May 1847, the month of the Bab's visit to Zanjan and of Hujjat's arrest. Whether this is one of the letters sent by the `ulama that resulted in Hujjat's arrest or whether it was prepared immediately afterwards and sent to Tehran to help make the case against him, we cannot tell for certain. What is remarkable is that there is no specific reference to Hujjat's being a Babi, though there are references to his being an "innovator and inventor in religion" and to his having "devised a

false sect." Almost all the accusations have to do with his denial of the authority of the Shi`ite `ulama and his unorthodox legal rulings. There are a number of explicit references to acts and words from before he became a Babi. Clearly, the `ulama of Zanjan did not yet understand the implications of the Bab's claims, nor did they distinguish between Hujjat's Babi and Akhbari heterodoxies. Perhaps Hujjat was still teaching the Babi doctrines with caution or semi-secretly. (Nabil, 533–34.)

It should be noted that there is a different explanation of Hujjat's exile to Tehran. On 11 Sha`ban 1263/25 July 1847 a riot broke out in Zanjan, occasioned by the governor's kidnapping and rape of a local woman (Sipihr, Nasikh, 2:206–7). According to Ittila`at, which evidently uses an additional source unknown to me, the governor was taken out of the city by a mob—face blackened, wearing a paper hat, and riding bareback and backwards on a donkey. Hujjat and his chief clerical rival both issued fatwas justifying the mob, and so both were brought to Tehran. There are chronological difficulties in associating Hujjat with this incident—although it is certainly his style.

In Tehran Hujjat was received by the Shah, who chided him for his willingness to follow this ignorant Shirazi Sayyid. (Sipihr, Nasikh, and other Muslim sources, certainly wrongly, date Hujjat's conversion to this exile in Tehran.) Hujjat maintained his convictions and was held for about a year under a loose house arrest. During this time he corresponded with the Bab and occasionally met with some of the Tehran Babis and debated with the `ulama at court.

When Hujjat was arrested and taken to Tehran, the Babis were a minor concern of the authorities—the source of local disturbances in the south and a possible threat to the prime minister's spiritual dominance of the Shah. A year and a half later, the situation was very different. The Bab had been moved from Maku to Chihriq at the urging of the Russian minister, who was concerned about the possible influence of the Bab in Russian Transcaucasia. (Momen, Babi, 72.) The Bab had been tried in Tabriz before the Crown-Prince and had maintained His claims against important `ulama of Tabriz. The summer of 1848 brought Babi disturbances in Mashhad. That fall there was open fighting as an armed body of Babis, bearing the black banners of Shi`ite apocalyptic rebellion, traveled west across Mazandaran. Rumors flew among the Babis of Tehran that they should all join this party for the final battle against ungodliness predicted by Shi`ite tradition. The Babis were stopped near Babol and built defenses at the little shrine of Shaykh Tabarsi. It was late the next spring before government troops were finally able to dislodge them. As this drama began to unfold, the old Shah died. Nasir al-Din Mirza, now the Shah, came from Tabriz, accompanied by his ruthless and efficient minister Amir-Kabir. Hujjat, hearing rumors that the new prime minister intended to have him killed, escaped from the city disguised as a soldier and returned to Zanjan. His followers received him with rapturous demonstrations. The new governor did not dare to act against Hujjat, but confined himself to torturing the two men who had announced Hujjat's return. Civil war was eighteen months away.

The division in the town between Babi and Muslim followed preexisting fault lines. Hujjat, before his conversion, was the leader of an Akhbari community to some extent distinct from the rest of the town. They lived in their own neighborhood, which became the Babi stronghold when fighting broke out. When he became a Babi these people followed his example. The lines were not sharp, though. Families divided when the fighting came. Many, especially those with property to protect, deserted when fighting became imminent.

It is also clear that the Babis were in most respects not much different than they had been as Muslims. Their views on theological issues were thoroughly Shi`ite; they simply accepted the Bab as the Imam. Their practices were also largely Shi`ite and Islamic. Evidently, they continued the Akhbari reforms that Hujjat had earlier instituted, with the addition of a few distinctively Babi practices derived from rather early writings of the Bab—the prohibition of tobacco and recitations from the writings of the Bab, for example. There is no evidence of practices from the Bayan, the Bab's major doctrinal and legal work composed about 1848.

The degree to which Babi laws were applied in this period is difficult to determine. It was probably only a year or less between Hujjat's initial conversion and his arrest and imprisonment in Tehran, so it is likely that the process of applying Babi law was incomplete when he was taken to Tehran in the early summer of 1847. The Zanjan Babis evidently sent a deputation to Hujjat in Tehran to ask for instructions about their obligations under Babi religious law. (Nabil, 538-39.) The Muslim historians allude to Hujjat's having imposed novel commands and prohibitions. One source refers to his contradicting Islamic law and then goes on to repeat the common accusation of apocalyptic antinomianism and of the practice of community of property and wives. More plausibly, he adds that they replaced the Muslim greeting of "Salam" with the Babi greeting "Allahu Akbar.' (Sipihr, Nasikh 3:89-90. Hidayat, Rawdat 10:448. I`tidad al-Saltana, Fitna, 61.)

There were also Shaykhi Babis in Zanjan, originally followers of the esoteric Shi`ite sect that furnished the bulk of the Babi converts elsewhere. During the fighting they were organized as a separate unit and may not have felt the same personal allegiance to Hujjat that the other Babis did. They were sufficiently distinct that the Muslim authorities tried to induce them to betray the other Babis. Shaykhis were followers of Shaykh Ahmad Ahsa'i. The Bab himself had been a student of Ahsa'i successor. Their esoteric interpretations of Shi`ite tradition and their expectation of the imminent return of the Hidden Imam had made them receptive to the Bab's message. Prior to his conversion Hujjat had been opposed to the Shaykhis. (Zanjani, Waqayi`, 42–43, 45–46. Nabil, 178.)

The outbreak of fighting and its causes

The Babis of Zanjan now began to attract attention. Prince Dolgorukov, the Russian minister in Tehran, reported on 7 March 1849, "In truth, there are rumors that in Zanjan they have appeared 800 strong, and that by their presence, they threaten to disrupt the public order." A year later on 14 March

1850 he reported that "their number reaches 2,000 people, and the ideas spread by them among the people incite common discontent." (Momen, Babi, 114.) The Muslim historians, who date Hujjat's conversion to his 1847–48 confinement in Tehran, date the beginning of the Zanjan Babi community to this period and say that the number of Babis in the district reached 15,000 by the spring of 1850.

As their numbers increased, the Babis behaved with greater boldness. Even before Hujjat's return, a number of Zanjan Babis had joined the fight at Shaykh Tabarsi; ten Zanjan Babis are said in one source or another to have died there. (Malik-Khusravi, Ta'rikh.) Others, believing there would be fighting in Zanjan, had secretly begun to prepare weapons and train for war. (Zanjani, Waqayi', 17–18. Hamadani, New History, 142. Nabil, 539. Hidayat, Rawdat, 10:448.) When Hujjat went out to his mosque to lead Friday prayers, three or four hundred followers escorted him. The crowds attending prayers overflowed the room reserved for prayer into the outer court of the mosque. (`Abd al-Ahad, "Reminiscences," 779–80.)

This Babi activity in as strategic a place as Zanjan alarmed the authorities. A new governor—Amir Aslan Khan, a maternal uncle of the Shah—was appointed and ordered to arrest Hujjat and return him to Tehran. Hujjat learned of this and no longer went out of his house except with a large armed escort. Despite the concern engendered by the fighting with the Babis in Mazandaran, the governor could do little. The government had stripped the kingdom of troops to suppress a major revolt against the new Shah in Khorasan in the extreme northeast of the country. The potential Babi threat in Zanjan had to wait until more serious matters were dealt with. Oddly enough, Muslim sources, though they accuse Hujjat of political ambitions, say that the government, specifically the prime minister, Amir-Kabir, had already decided to arrest Hujjat before the first clash between the Babis and the authorities. The Babi and Baha'i sources assume the decision to arrest Hujjat was due to these clashes. (Sipihr, Nasikh, 3:90. Hidayat, Rawdat, 10:448.)

In the meantime tensions between the Babis and Muslims of Zanjan rose. The clergy began complaining to Tehran again. The governor, unable to deal with the situation by force, invited Hujjat to the governorate for negotiations. Hujjat came, accompanied by two hundred armed supporters who waited respectfully but pointedly outside the audience hall. Hujjat and the governor agreed that Hujjat would cease preaching and leading prayers in the mosque and that the Babis would pay triple taxes. In return, the governor's men would leave the Babis alone and any Babis who committed offenses would be dealt with by Hujjat. The governor was able to inform Tehran that a reconciliation had been effected. Hujjat for a time prayed and preached in his own house. However, when a Babi was attacked in his home after having been overheard criticizing the clergy, the Babis came to Hujjat and complained that his inactivity was encouraging their enemies. Hujjat returned to leading prayers and preaching in his mosque. This agreement is reported only by the well-informed Haydar Big, but it makes sense of the events that followed. Its absence from the official Muslim

accounts is probably explained by the fact that the governor would have kept the extra taxes for himself. (Hamadani, New History, 140–42.)

The incident that led to open fighting was a street fight between a Babi youth and a Muslim in which the Muslim was wounded. The Babi escaped, but another Babi who had been with him was imprisoned. Hujjat intervened on his behalf and offered the governor a bribe, but the governor would not release the man. Hujjat, aggrieved at the violation of the agreement, sent an armed party to release the prisoner by force. (Nicolas, Ali Mohammad, 338–40, contains an eyewitness account by the Babi youth who escaped. Zanjani, Waqayi`, 18–19. Sipihr, Nasikh, 3:90. `Abd al-Ahad, "Reminiscences," pp. 781–83. Nabil, 540–41. Hidayat, Rawdat, 10:448.) The next day the governor responded by sending a party of lutis, street toughs, to kidnap Hujjat while he led prayers. The Babi guards repulsed the attack and wounded the leader. One Babi guard was wounded and captured. He was dragged before the governor, where two leading anti-Babi `ulama promptly issued a death warrant. Amir Aslan Khan, the governor, spoke abusively to him and then said, "If thou wilt curse the Founder of thy religion and Mulla Muhammad-`Ali, I will not slay thee." The Babi replied, "Curses be upon thine own foul nature, even unto seventy generations of thy forebears, for that they have been instrumental in producing a bastard like thee, who has brought about such great mischief and trouble!" Amir Aslan Khan, a man of temper, drew his sword and struck the Babi prisoner in the mouth, laying open his face from ear to ear. He then ordered the people to attack him. One mujtahid was so angry that he stabbed him in the stomach with a penknife, shouting to the onlookers, "O Muslims, this is holy war!" Others hurried to follow, each striking with whatever he had at hand. When the Babi was dead, his naked body was thrown out into the public square outside the governorate. He was the first Babi to be killed in Zanjan. The son of one of the `ulama was shot to death in the fighting that day and some forty others were wounded. It was Friday, 5 Rajab 1267/17 May 1850. The next day fighting started in earnest.

Note: The Babi and Baha’i sources for the events of this day differ in many details, but agree on the general course of events. Nabil, 541–43. `Abd al-Ahad, "Reminiscences," 783–84, 791–95. The casualty figures are from Sipihr, Nasikh, 3:90. Zanjani, Waqayi`, 22–23.

It is clear that larger causes than these trivial incidents lay behind the fighting. The governor, Amir Aslan Khan Majd al-Dawla, had been one of those present at the trial of the Bab in Tabriz. He was a cruel man, tactless and given to rages. He was under orders from Amir Kabir to return Hujjat to Tehran. The governor, in short, had been waiting for a year for the opportunity to arrest Hujjat and suppress the Babis of Zanjan. The war aims of the government, then, are clear enough. They wished to ensure that there would be no more disturbances of the sort that had been so difficult to put down in Mazandaran. (Sipihr, Nasikh, 3:90. Hamadani, New History, 141. Diya’i, "Sanadi," 163–64.) The clergy had been agitating against Hujjat for a number of years and considered the suppression of the Babis to be necessary for the protection

of Islam and their own authority.

The Babi historians attribute the outbreak of fighting to the incidents that occasioned it and to the jealousy, anger, and incompetence of the governor and the `ulama. The Babi war aims were correspondingly vague. They expected that they would have to fight but did not think they should initiate it. (Hamadani, New History, 142. Zanjani, Waqayi`, 17–18.) The reason is theological. The Babis, in accordance with Shi`ite law, held that when an Imam is in the world, only he is allowed to declare holy war. War might be undertaken in self-defense, but attack was unacceptable without an explicit order from the Imam—i.e., the Bab himself. From the earliest days of the movement the Babis expected that such an order would come. The Hidden Imam was to wage war against his enemies and defeat them, and the Babis expected to join this crusade to purge the world of evil and unbelief. The Babis of Zanjan were ready, but the order had not come—indeed, the Bab is said to have prohibited Hujjat from ordering the use of force when he passed through Zanjan three years earlier. This battle was not part of that apocalyptic war, although it could become so if instructions came from the Bab. During the fighting, Hujjat subjected the Babis to considerable tactical disadvantages in obedience to this principle.

Note: See MacEoin, "Holy War," especially 98–101, 118–20, though his account of Zanjan is misleading. There is no evidence for the declaration of a "defensive jihad" at Zanjan. The Babi accounts agree that the Zanjan Babis did not declare holy war but considered themselves to be acting simply in self-defense: Zanjani, Waqayi`, 28, 36–37; Nabil, 546, 553; Hamadani, New History, 137–38, 145; `Abd al-Ahad, "Reminiscences," 791, 810–11. Throughout most of Shi`ite history scholars had considered the obligation of holy war to be in abeyance in the absence of the Imam, though in the first half of the nineteenth century the `ulama had declared holy war several times, Zanjan being one of the occasions; see Diya’i, "Sanadi," 163–64, and Zanjani, Waqayi`, 28. Hujjat, an Akhbari, evidently considered this to be an innovation.

Two months after the outbreak of fighting, news arrived that the Bab was dead, executed by public firing squad in Tabriz at the order of the prime minister. There would be no holy war with the Bab at its head. There are indications that in Zanjan the Babi policy on holy war changed after the death of the Bab. Thus, in the later stages of the siege the Babis conducted various sorties, though it was too late for these to have any real effect. (Zanjani, Waqayi`, 60–62. `Abd al-Ahad, "Reminiscences," 800, 812.)

On the other hand, the Babis could hope for an agreement to restore peace to Zanjan. In that case the Babis could simply go home and resume their ordinary lives. There were, in fact, intermittent negotiations, but nothing came of them. On the government side, key officials and officers were unable to deal with the Babis except as damnable heretics and rebels. Moreover, the Babis held that the authority of the Bab was superior to that of the government. Not surprisingly, the officers and officials in the government camp viewed this as arrogance, heresy, and rebellious ambition. There was also doubt about the good

faith of the representatives of the government. The Zanjan Babis were well aware that in Mazandaran fighting had ended with a truce treacherously broken by the army. When in Zanjan a Babi delegation consisting of boys and old men was seized and mistreated, any chance of the Babis accepting one of the government peace offers was ended. Thus, the final Babi war aim had to be the emulation of the Imam Husayn and his band of doomed heroes. The Babis had no choice but to fight for their honor before God. There was no other option, neither hope of victory nor of honorable surrender.

Note: Hidayat, Rawdat, 10:449–54. Sipihr, Nasikh, 3:93. Momen, Babi, 116–19. Zanjani, Waqayi`, 57–58. `Abd al-Ahad, "Reminiscences," 809–11. Hamadani, New History, 372–73. Nabil, 554–55.

The course of fighting

Soon after the freeing of the imprisoned Babi, the governor ordered the division of the town into Babi and Muslim quarters preparatory to the destruction of the Babis. (Zanjani, Waqayi`, 23–24. Hamadani, New History, 143–44. `Abd al-Ahad, "Reminiscences," 787. Nabil, 543–44. Sipihr, Nasikh, 3:90. Hidayat, Rawdat, 10:449.) Zanjan in those days was surrounded by a crenellated mud brick wall about six meters high. The highway ran through the town parallel to the river. The town was thus longer from east to west than north to south. The Babis were mostly in the eastern half of the town.

The day after the first fighting Hujjat, at the urging of his lieutenants, ordered the capture of the fort of `Ali-Mardan Khan, a substantial stronghold that overlooked the boundary between the Muslim and Babi quarters. A large stock of ammunition and weapons was captured with the fort. (Hamadani, New History, 145–46. Zanjani, Waqayi`, 36–37. Sipihr, Nasikh, 3:91.) According to the official chronicle, the next day, Sunday, 19 May 1850, the Babis attacked the house of the governor, but were driven off. (Sipihr, Nasikh, 3:91.) A lull of some days followed as both sides prepared for further fighting. The Babis controlled the entire eastern half of the town and barricaded all the streets leading into their quarter. Officers were appointed for each barricade, forty or more in all, and men were apportioned to each. Each barricade had a watchword, usually a name of God, with which to alert others if their position was threatened. Fallback positions were prepared in case a barricade was overrun. Supplies were stockpiled in the fort. In the course of the siege the Babis made their own gunpowder and even several cannon. At the beginning of the siege there were probably about 1,800 fighting men in the Babi quarter with somewhat more women and children.

Note: Zanjani, Waqayi`, 30–32, 38–39, 51–52, 62, 66. Hamadani, New History, 143–44. Sipihr, Nasikh, 3:90–91, 93. Hidayat, Rawdat, 10:449. Nicolas, Ali Mohammad, 343. `Abd al-Ahad, "Reminiscences," 774, 809, 818–19. I`tidad al-Saltana, Fitna, 264–65. Momen, Babi, 117–18.

On the Muslim side appeals for troops were sent to the authorities, and the militia was raised in the surrounding villages. The central government responded immediately. The British ambassador wrote, "Five hours after receipt

of [news of fighting at Zanjan] a Battalion of Infantry 400 horse and three guns marched toward Zenjan. This is an instance unexampled in Persia of military celerity, which perhaps would not be surpassed in many countries of Europe." (Sheil to Palmerston No. 64, 25 May 1850: FO 60 151, in Momen, Babi, 115). The authorities were deeply alarmed. The first regular troops reached the town on 1 June, with other large contingents arriving on 13 and 16 June. At this time there were perhaps 6,000 government troops at the town, in addition to the irregulars raised locally. (Momen, Babi, 115–16.)

Though there had been fighting earlier, the first general attack by government troops against the Babis came on 1 July 1850, preceded by an attempt to blow up a Babi barricade with a mine. The attack failed and was succeeded by a lull. (Sipihr, Nasikh, 3:91–92.) According to Baha'i sources, Sayyid `Ali Khan Firuzkuhi, the first officer in general command of the government troops, was sympathetic to the Babis and was thus replaced and disgraced. (Hamadani, New History, 140–43, 157, 372. Nabil, 556–57. Hidayat, Rawdat, 10:449–50. Sipihr, Nasikh, 3:93–94.). A pattern soon developed: a new unit and commander would arrive, make a determined attack with the half-hearted support of the previous troops, and make, if anything, only indecisive gains. The new unit would then camp sullenly outside the town with the others and matters would lapse into an informal truce until new troops and a higher-ranking officer arrived.

The government attacks achieved so little because the Babis were in carefully prepared positions and defended themselves desperately. The town was a warren of narrow streets and houses, all interconnected and prepared for defense, and could hardly be taken by infantry without heavy losses. Though the government troops had artillery, the guns were mostly light field pieces more suitable for use against troops in the open. When a ball hit the mud brick walls and dirt barricades of the Babi defenses, there would be a puff of dust and the surface of the wall would crumble, but it would be easy enough for the Babi to reinforce the walls from behind. Mortars caused casualties among the women and children, but there is no evidence they were effective against the Babi defenses themselves. It was probably not practical to carry enough ammunition from the arsenals of Tehran and Tabriz to make a decisive difference. Eventually, heavier guns were brought in, and these did gradually drive back the Babis.

In addition, the Babis had sympathizers among the besieging troops, even among the officers. Many of the officers resented being made to fight against civilians in a battle they blamed on the `ulama. Babi sources report that certain units, notably the two `Aliyu'llahi (Ahl-i Haqq) regiments, sympathized with the Babis and for that reason held back from the fighting. (Hamadani, New History, 141–42, 157, 372.) Moreover, the individual soldiers had grown up with the stories of the heroism of the outnumbered defenders of the Imam Husayn and the brutality of his Syrian enemies and with the prophecies of the army of the Imam at the end of time. Many, while not Babis themselves, must have entertained secret doubts about the justice of their actions.

Women played a role in the fighting, to the fascination of the nineteenth century Iranian historians. There were three thousand or more Babi women and children within the defenses. The Babis were well organized, and women sewed, baked, nursed the wounded, built and repaired barricades, and gathered spent bullets and cannonballs for reuse. Children helped as well. Occasionally, women extinguished the fuses on shells fired into the Babi positions, using wet blankets kept ready for this task. (Zanjani, Waqayi`, 49–50. Nabil, 563. `Abd al-Ahad, "Reminiscences," 769.) The women did not normally fight, and most seemed to have survived the siege, but there was a famous exception.

The government officials and the `ulama together wrote to the Shah in this wise [giving a list of excuses for their failure to defeat the Babis]: "Fourth, there is a regiment of Babi virgin girls. The Babis fight for love of them." They wrote a great deal in this vein and sent it to the king.

This story became very well known among the people, but the truth of the matter of the virgin girl is this: There was an old man, one of the followers of Hujjat, who had died. Two daughters survived him, one named Zaynab and the other Shah-Sanam. When the barricades were being built and the fighting had begun, Zaynab went to Hujjat and said, "I have no father or brother to fight the holy war in the path of God. Permit me to go and fight." He replied, "The holy war is prohibited for women." She said, "In this dispensation the illusions and veils of the past are torn asunder. Issue your judgment accordingly!" He gave that girl the name of Rustam-`Ali. She was in one of the barricades, dressed in man’s clothing, with the other pure souls. One day the soldiers attacked the barricade. That lioness recited these verses of Jawhari:

Name me a sect free of disgrace.

Tell me the tale of Islam’s unbelief!

Thus is the Muslim an infidel.

Shouting these verses, Rustam-`Ali threw herself from the barricade and charged the enemy soldiers. Thinking that a large group was following her, they fled. The people at the barricade called her back, but as she returned, one of the townspeople shot and killed her.

Note: Zanjani, Waqayi`, 55–56. See also `Abd al-Ahad, "Reminiscences," 802–3; Nabil, 549–52; Sipihr, Nasikh, 3:94. One of the local mujtahids also ruled that the jihad in Zanjan was a fard `ayn—an obligation binding on the individual—that applied even to women. He held that a woman could participate in the fighting without permission of her husband; see Diya’i, "Sanadi."

Throughout the summer and fall the Babis steadily lost men and were slowly driven back upon their strong points, but months went by without the government troops achieving anything decisive. By late fall Babi resistance began to fail. The Babis had been driven a good way back from the city wall. The fort of `Ali-Mardan Khan, where most of the Babi supplies and munitions were stored, was for a time cut off. A Babi counterattack reopened a route to the fort, but it finally fell to the Garrus Regiment during a general assault in early

December. With its fall the Babi position became untenable. (Zanjani, Waqayi`, 49–51, 60. Hamadani, New History, 158–59. Sipihr, Nasikh, 3:95–96.)

At this point Hujjat told his people that they might leave if they could. A number did so but were immediately captured. The remaining Babis regrouped around the house of Hujjat, which they stubbornly defended against government attacks and an artillery barrage. There was talk among some of the younger Babis of killing the women to prevent them falling into enemy hands, but cooler heads prevailed. (Zanjani, Waqayi`, 62–64.) Soon after, Hujjat was wounded in the right forearm while inspecting the defenses. He was taken to his house where he languished for some days. His wound was kept secret from the enemy and even from most of the Babis. He died about 30 December 1850, counseling his people to try to hold out three more days. This may be explained by a reference a plan by the government troops to break off the siege for the winter. He was buried in great secrecy in his house—fully dressed with his sword by his side as befitted a martyr—and the walls were knocked over on top of the grave to conceal it.

At this point Babi morale collapsed. When an offer of safe conduct arrived from the government commander, the Babis surrendered. Only about a hundred Babi fighters had survived the siege.

Note: Zanjani, Waqayi`, 60–62, 64–6571–73. Hamadani, New History, 161–68, 291–92, 373.. Nabil, 573, 577–78. `Abd al-Ahad, "Reminiscences," 768–69, 812–13, 818–21. Sipihr, Nasikh, 3:96–97. Diya’i, "Sanadi," 164. Momen, Babi, 122.

The aftermath

After the Babi surrender the troops immediately looted the remnants of the Babi quarter. The men were seized and the women and children were taken to the house of Sayyid Abu al-Qasim, the leading mujtahid of the town. They were held in the stables there for forty days before being robbed and released. (Zanjani, Waqayi`, 66–73. Nabil, 569–70.) It is not absolutely clear whether the women were imprisoned there, had taken sanctuary there to escape the vengeance of the troops, or some combination of the two. There had been a scuffle between the townspeople and the troops over who should have custody of the Babi women. The townspeople were evidently unwilling to turn over to the soldiers women of the town, even if they were Babis. Nonetheless, the women were treated harshly, on the whole, and some of the children died.

In the meantime, after three days sixty-six male prisoners were taken to the square in front of the governor’s house and bayoneted to death by the troops. Hujjat’s young son was tricked into revealing the site of his father’s grave. The body was dug up and dragged around the town. Forty-four Babis were sent in chains to Tehran with the returning army, and four were executed there on 2 March 1851. The rest were dispersed to various places in Iran. The remaining prisoners in Zanjan, people of no great importance, were released into the custody of family and friends. (Zanjani, Waqayi`, 73–76. Sipihr, Nasikh, 3:96–97. Momen, Babi, 123–24. Hamadani, New History, 165–68. `Abd

al-Ahad, "Reminiscences," 813, 817, 819.)

The Babi disaster at Zanjan was total. No Babi leader survived, and only a handful of the fighters. The survivors were almost all women and children. Most of these were sent back to their families, who in many or most cases were Muslim. Babis continued to live in Zanjan, but it was not until the 1860's, when the children of those killed were young adults, that there was again a real Babi community there—though it was divided between Azalis and Baha'is. Further persecutions in 1867 killed three young Baha'i leaders, and little more is heard until the 1890s. Even then it seems to have been a dangerous place to be a Baha'i. Today the Baha'i community of Zanjan probably has not reached the numbers of the Babi community of 1850.

Causes and Effects

Social factors.

Given the turbulent history of pre-modern Iranian cities, the observer might be more puzzled by an urban revolt that did not happen. Nineteenth century Iranian towns were riven by the Haydari-Ni`mati rivalry that pitted rival quarters against each other. The cause of this widespread feud, which apparently goes back to Safavid times, seems to have unknown even the Iranians themselves—a manifestation of human perversity like the enmity of the Green and Blue chariot-racing factions that troubled the peace of Byzantium. (Mirjafari, "Haydari.") Small disturbances were common enough. In 1847 Zanjan itself had expelled its governor when he abducted and raped a woman, a disturbance in which Hujjat was probably involved. On a larger scale, in 1843 the largely Iranian population of Karbala revolted against the Ottoman authorities and in the end was slaughtered even in the sacred shrines themselves. (Cole and Momen, "Mafia.") It was an incident not unlike the Babi revolts. And, of course, the role of urban disturbances in the two great Iranian revolutions of the twentieth century is well known.

Not enough is known about the makeup of the Babi community of Zanjan, or about the population of Zanjan in 1850, to do any very deep analysis of the social and economic context of the battle. The Haydari-Ni`mati feud is not mentioned, though perhaps it was there. Neither the Babi nor the Muslim sources tell us much about the economic status of the participants, for these writers did not think it was relevant. The most conspicuous sociological fact about the Zanjan Babis was that they were a pre-existing group, the followers of Hujjat, who became Babis more or less en masse. It seems likely, though it is not proven, that they were an Akhbari community and that they had been the followers of Hujjat's father. They mostly lived in the eastern part of town, where they were evidently the bulk of the population. They were distinct from the Shaykhi Babis of Zanjan. Some also came from neighboring villages, although most likely the villagers had close links of kinship with the Akhbari Babis of the town. The Babis were thus not an economic class but a cross-section of the town defined by quarter and by allegiance to a particular religious leader. There is no evidence of the tribal or ethnic identity of this group or whether it

differed from the ethnic identity of the rest of the town and district.

The Babi and Baha'i historians do note, however, that when open fighting broke out, it was the wealthier members of the community who were most likely to desert the cause. The individuals who distinguished themselves in the fighting and rose to leadership tended not to come from the traditional leading classes. One gets the impression of small craftsmen, retired sergeants, and the like, finding in the crisis a chance to express their talents. (Zanjani, Waqayi`, 24–25, 40–43. `Abd al-Ahad, "Reminiscences," 779. Amanat, Resurrection, 358.) It is known that Hujjat and his followers, even before their conversion to Babism, were sharply critical of the religious and political leadership. It thus seems very probable that the Babis' willingness to fight had something to do with resentment at the incompetence and corruption of the leadership of the existing order. Given that not much specific is known about individual Babis in Zanjan and that even less is known about those who opposed the Babis or stayed neutral, little more can be said with certainty about the social and economic foundations of the Zanjan Babi community or about the social and economic factors that predisposed them to desperate armed resistance to the forces of the government.

Conceptual structures.

There is much more of interest to say about the conceptual structures that shaped the actions of the various participants. Four points of reference seem to have been important: the return of the Twelfth Imam, the paradigm of Karbala, the inviolability of Islamic law, and the autocratic model of governmental reform.

Shi`ites believe that Muhammad entrusted his temporal and spiritual authority to the line of his successors, the Imams. This authority is thought to still belong to the twelfth of these successors, who lives in the fabulous underground cities of Jabulqa and Jabarsa. Since the Imam is not present to exercise his authority, it has for the time being passed into the hands of Muslim rulers and clergy, but when the Imam returns, he will reclaim his authority in this world. The Babis believed that—in one sense or another—the Bab was the return of the Hidden Imam. This simple fact was a permanent bar to any real coexistence of the Babis and the state. The Bab might have chosen not to delegitimize the structures of secular society, but he might do so at any time. The Babis of Zanjan and elsewhere admitted the legitimacy of the existing order only insofar as the Bab did not reject it. Conflict resulted when the Bab's instructions conflicted with those of established authority. This conflict was equally well understood by the authorities. Once the nature of the Babi movement was understood, the government moved systematically and implacably to destroy it.

Moreover, the prophecies of Shi`ite tradition told of a great war in which the Imam and his chosen companions would destroy the forces of evil. The Babis expected to be summoned to participate in this campaign; arguably, the fighting in Mazandaran was conceived as being the start of that campaign. The Bab

certainly discussed holy war in his writings. Though he seems never to have called for the launching of the final war against evil, neither Babis nor state officials doubted that eventually he would. On that score too, both sides saw war as inevitable.

The second conceptual framework was the paradigm of Karbala, the battle in which the Imam Husayn, betrayed by the bulk of his followers, with a tiny band of companions fought until all were killed by the forces of a wicked and irreligious government. Though in a sense Karbala and the holy war of the Hidden Imam are opposites—the one utter defeat and the other inevitable triumph—when war began in Zanjan, the two seemed to fuse in the Babis' minds. When the news arrived of the Bab's execution, the Karbala motif became uppermost. The example of the martyrs of Karbala would have shaped the Babis' attitudes towards the fighting, giving it a deeply symbolic quality, and steeled them for death and inevitable but holy defeat. The women, imprisoned in the stables of a mujtahid were like the women brought captive to unholy Damascus. The Babis' opponents would also have noticed the parallels. The campaign dragged on for so long because of the lack of enthusiasm of the government troops. They too had grown up with the story of Karbala, and though they might not have been Babis themselves, they could scarcely have avoided wondering if they themselves were not reenacting a part in the Karbala tragedy as troops of a new godless Yazid.

The actions of the clergy were shaped by another conceptual framework, that of Islamic law, changeless and inviolable. The Bab's claims of divine guidance were not wholly heretical in Shi`ism, a religion in which the Hidden Imam may at any time choose to reassert his authority through whatever channels he wishes. The true source of the righteous indignation animating the anti-Babi clergy was Babi innovation in matters of law. This is very clear in the petition filed against Hujjat, in which petty changes in accepted Islamic law are presented as grave dangers to the security of religion and state. The clergy and their followers might tolerate claims of charismatic authority, but they could not tolerate the abrogation of any part of Islamic law.

A fourth set of ideas molded the thinking of the government officials who made the decision to suppress the Babis and execute the Bab, particularly Amir Kabir and his pupil, the young Nasir al-Din Shah. Like many thoughtful Iranians of the governing class, Amir Kabir realized that the country was in a desperate state and that drastic reforms were needed to modernize state and society before the country was swallowed up by the Europeans. Only a strong and autocratic ruler could impose the necessary reforms. Religion might be tolerated or encouraged in its sphere, but the king must exercise full authority in his. The Bab's movement, no matter how sincere its followers might be or how legitimate their complaints, was a distraction that must be disposed of in order to allow the state to focus on more urgent problems. The words that the Baha'i historian Nabil attributes to Amir Kabir as he prepared to order the execution of the Bab can scarcely be authentic, but they do express the situation as he must have seen it:

[The innocence of the Bab is] wholly irrelevant to the issue with which we are faced. The interests of the State are in jeopardy, and we can in no wise tolerate these periodic upheavals. Was not the Imam Husayn, in view of the paramount necessity for safeguarding the unity of the State, executed by those same persons who had seen him more than once receive marks of exceptional affection from Muhammad, his Grandfather? Did they not in such circumstances refuse to consider the rights which his lineage had conferred upon him? Nothing short of the remedy I advocate can uproot this evil and bring us the peace for which we long. (Nabil, 502.)

Why Zanjan?

Why then did open fighting not break out in other places where there were actually smaller Babi disturbances? We may look, for example, at Shiraz following the Bab's return from pilgrimage in 1845–46, Isfahan during the Bab's visit, Qazvin during Tahira's visit, and Tehran in 1852, when certain Babis attempted to assassinate the Shah. The first answer would seem to be that the Babis in these places did not form a large and cohesive unit that could react by banding together to fight. In Zanjan and Nayriz the Babis were a pre-existing community. At Shaykh Tabarsi they were a small army on the move. In the other cities there was no large and cohesive community but rather groups of loosely associated individuals drawn mainly from Shaykhi networks. In Tehran the Babis often were emigrants or refugees from elsewhere, forming groups that could not yet have been very closely knit. Second, except in Tehran the aborted disturbances took place early in the Babi period, before either side had concluded that violence was inevitable. A third factor was that all these cities, and especially Tehran, were strategic points and were much more carefully policed than country towns like Zanjan and Nayriz. In Tehran the authorities watched the Babi networks closely, imprisoning, exiling, or executing Babi leaders from time to time. Thus, when some Babis did actually plot to overthrow the government, the crackdown was ruthless and efficient. A final factor was that the Babis had no clear instructions from their leader to organize sedition, so except for the incident at Shaykh Tabarsi, open fighting occurred more or less by accident. In places like Shiraz and Tehran where the Babi leaders were inclined to accommodation, it was less likely that there would be trouble.

The events in Zanjan resemble most closely those in Nayriz. In Nayriz too there was mass conversion of a pre-existing social unit under the influence of a Babi cleric whose family already enjoyed great prestige in the town. The Babis already lived in the same quarters and had established leadership and group solidarity. When challenged, they easily slipped into the mode of armed resistance. The fact that neither town was an important place carefully controlled by the central government probably meant that there was more of a tradition of successful resistance to the authorities. Nayriz and Zanjan are to be contrasted in fundamental respects with Shaykh Tabarsi, the earliest and best known battle between the Babis and the government. The Babis at Shaykh Tabarsi were not a pre-existent group but were an ad hoc band of religious

enthusiasts gathered around the charismatic leadership of Mulla Husayn Bushru'i and Quddus. They were united only by religion, and their fighting had a much more symbolic character.

In short, the explanation for the pattern of Babi uprisings is this: The logic of the positions of the two parties made conflict inevitable. Where the Babis were organized and in sufficient numbers, they fought back. Where they were not, they hid, fled, or were killed.

Goals and consequences.

Finally, we must consider the purpose for which the Zanjan Babis and their opponents fought and the actual long-term consequences of their actions. In the absence of an order for jihad from the Bab, the war-aims of the Babis were simply to defend themselves, and if they were unable to do so successfully, to emulate the example of the Imam Husayn and his followers, dying honestly in defense of the truth of their faith. The war-aims of the government were more practical: to eliminate the Babi military threat on the essential Tehran-Tabriz road. Each in its way was successful. Unable to make honorable terms with the government commanders, the Babis fought until only about a hundred of their fighters remained to surrender. Some others probably escaped in the closing weeks of the siege, but in general they were true to the example of Husayn. As for the government, they succeeded in nearly exterminating the Zanjan Babi community. It was not until the surviving children became adults that anything like an active Babi community reemerged in Zanjan. The Babis never again made trouble there.

Zanjan played only a small role in the historical memory of the later followers of the Bab. Though it was by far the largest of the Babi uprisings and though those killed there probably constitute nearly half of all the Babi and Baha'i martyrs to date, it was an event isolated from the mainstream of Babi life. Hujjat and his lieutenants were not part of the Shaykhi network from which most of the Babi leaders were drawn. Few of the other Babi leaders knew him. Hujjat was in contact with Bahaullah while he was in Tehran, and he corresponded with the Bab, but the Zanjan community was nonetheless isolated. Thus, Zanjan never assumed the symbolic importance of Shaykh Tabarsi in later Baha'i imagination. The greatest effect on the Babis was indirect: most likely, the outbreak of fighting in Zanjan determined Amir Kabir to order the execution of the Bab.

As for the clergy, the Zanjan uprising, at least as part of the general challenge of Babism, forced them into a more rigid stand against religious unorthodoxy and innovation. They tightened their own organization, rallying around the leading maraji` taqlid and becoming both more effective and less open to internal innovation.

The effects of the battle were also felt by the townspeople and by the state. First, large portions of the city were left in ruin. Thirty years later when Browne passed through, the city still had not entirely recovered. Second, the event was profoundly frightening. Zanjan was not a remote spot like Shaykh

Tabarsi or Nayriz; any Iranian who had traveled between Tehran and Tabriz would have spent at least a night in Zanjan. For decades, travelers and officials passing through heard tales of the supernatural valor and cunning of Hujjat and the Zanjan Babis. The success of the Babi resistance pointed out the inadequacies of the Persian army and the vulnerability of the state to popular uprising. The result was a hardening of state resolve against the Babis and probably as well against other sorts of popular movements.

The last word belongs to the Baha'i historian Nabil:

I was privileged, nine years after the termination of that memorable struggle, to visit Zanjan and witness the scene of those terrible butcheries. I beheld with grief and horror the ruins of the fort of `Ali-Mardan Khan, and trod the ground that had been saturated with the blood of its immortal defenders. I could discern on its gates and walls traces of the carnage that marked its surrender to the enemy, and could discover upon the very stones that had served as barricades, stains of the blood that had been so profusely shed in that neighborhood. (Nabil, 579.)

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— The Babi Uprising in Zanjan (Used by permission of the curator)