

traveled to Baghdad, where he met Baha?-Allah. This meeting made a great impression on him, and he became a believer (H. Afnan, p. 319). In Yazd the Shirazis operated their various commercial activities from K?aja Caravansary, where they had rented some “six-seven large commercial offices” (hojra; Yazd dar asnad, p. 106).

The Shirazis were engaged in commercial activities, ranging from trade in traditional commodities to that of newly introduced items, such as opium (taryak). It was Haji Mirza Mohammad-?Ali (1824-96), Mohammad-Taqi’s eldest brother, who was mostly involved in the opium trade with his younger brother, Haji Mirza Bozorg, at least until the consumption of, and trade in, opium was banned by Baha?-Allah (item 155; Ganjina-ye hodud, pp. 428-29; E. Afnan, p. 17 of draft article). However, as far as Mohammad-Taqi is concerned, while it is possible that he or other members of the Shirazi clan either helped Mohammad-?Ali in the opium trade or even partnered with him (as long as it was not forbidden to do so by Baha?-Allah), the available sources indicate that Mohammad-Taqi’s main commercial activity was elsewhere. These included, among others, real estate (mainly land purchase, rent, or lease); agriculture and cultivation; trade in a range of commodities (e.g., gum tragacanth, sugar, cubic sugar, rice, silk), as well as farming of official offices, such as the entire customs of Yazd for the year of Tushqan?il 1270s (corresponding to 21 March 1891 until 19 March 1892) for 40,000 tomans (Aqa Haydar-?Ali to Amin-al-Zarb, as quoted in Mahdavi, pp. 83-84; Mohammad-Taqi to Amin-al-Zarb, in Yazd dar asnad, pp. 283, 427, 465; ‘Ali-Naqi Aštari to Amin-al-Zarb, in Yazd dar asnad, pp. 331-32; Malmiri, p. 67).

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Concurrent to his own family’s commercial activities, Mohammad-Taqi became heavily involved in matters related to the merchant (tojjar) community, and specifically in their relations with the local and central governments in Iran. In this regard he was actively and heavily involved in promoting reform in these relations, efforts which in 1884 resulted in the establishment of the Councils of Representatives of the Merchants (Majles-e wokala-ye tojjar), which dismantled a year later (e.g., see Mohammad-Taqi to Amin-al-Zarb, in Yazd dar asnad, pp. 239-40 and also pp. 132, 337-40; Gilbar, pp. 639-74).

In Yazd the Shirazis enjoyed much respect and honor, in spite of the fact that everyone in that city knew that they were Babi-Bahais. According to Malmiri, a Bahai merchant who worked with the Shirazis, this was a direct result of a number of reasons, such as their status as sayyeds (descendants of Prophet Mohammad); the fact that they were big wholesalers with considerable wealth; their pleasant and kind character; and their pious behavior, chastity, faithfulness, and wisdom. Such characteristics were enough to draw many of the locals towards the Bahai faith (Malmiri, pp. 59-61), to protect the Shirazis

during fanatical persecutions, and to gain the respect of officials and dignitaries

Among the Shirazis of Yazd, it was Mohammad-Taqi who enjoyed a special status. This was not only the result of the good reputation of the Shirazis, but also specifically due to his own righteous, humble, and trustworthy character (Taherzadeh, I, p. 199; 'Abd-al-Baha', p. 127); his position as a prominent merchant in Yazd; his close association and friendship with Aqa Mohammad-Hasan Esfahani (also known as Amin-al-Zarb), probably the richest and most influential merchant in late 19th-century Iran (Yazd dar Asnad, p. 106); and his activities in relation to representing the merchant class (see above).

Thus, given all his qualities and prominence in Yazd, Mohammad-Taqi seemed the right choice when Tsarist Russia decided to appoint a Russian commercial agent in Yazd. He was offered this position in 1889, which he readily accepted (Russian embassy to Haji Mirza Sayyed Mohammad-Taqi, 23 April 1889, p. 1; Mohammad-Taqi Širazi to Russian embassy, 30 April 1889; Tumanski, "Report"). The requirements of the post were to represent and assist Russian subjects, especially merchants, in Iran (Russian embassy to Haji Mirza Sayyed Mohammad-Taqi, 23 April 1889, p. 1).

The post came with the title of Wakil-al-Dawla-ye Rus (representative of the Russian government), a special and large golden emblem of the Russian government, and a Russian flag that was fixed over Mohammad-Taqi's house. Furthermore, as Russian representative, he enjoyed all the benefits that came with such a post, for instance, immunity from legal and religious persecution as well as 24-hour guarded protection for him and his family (Malmiri, pp. 60-61). In this post, which he held for over a decade, Mohammad-Taqi not only fulfilled his duties, but also used it to protect and facilitate his and his family's business in Iran and in the new Russian Transcaspian territories, where he set up new branches of his business in localities such as Ashkhabad and Bukhara, places to which Bahais from Iran gradually began to immigrate from Iran during the mid-1880s (Mohammad-Taqi to the Russian ambassador in Tehran, 12 October 1889, p. 4; Mohammad-Taqi Širazi to 'Arab Saheb, 12 October 1889, p. 5).

Since Mohammad-Taqi filled his post to the full satisfaction of the Russian government, on 7 January 1902 he was awarded a golden medal from the Order of Saint Stanislav (Russian consulate, Isfahan to the Russian ambassador, Tehran, 11 November 1901, pp. 29a-29b; Russian ambassador in Tehran to the First Dept., Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 15 November 1901, pp. 30a-30b; First Dept., Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Russian Mission in Tehran, 20 November 1901, p. 31; Director, the First Dept., Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to Kimon Manuilovich Argiropulo, 19 February 1902, pp. 33a-33b).

By the end of the 1890s, Mohammad-Taqi was recognized as "the leader and the headman" of the Shirazis (Yazd dar asnad, p. 106). By then he was also preparing himself to retire from business activity and to devote himself

entirely to serving his religion. One of the landed properties, which his brother, Mohammad-ʿAli, had bought in 1887 in Ashkhabad, had been dedicated by Bahaʿ-Allah for the building of a Mašreq al-Adkar, a Bahai house of worship, with other properties to be endowed to support it (H. Afnan, p. 319). Thus, when ʿAbd-al-Bahaʿ asked Mohammad-Taqi to superintend the construction of the Mašreq al-Adkar, he closed his business in Yazd and set out for Ashkhabad (4 April 1900). The construction began in late 1902 (Armstrong-Ingram, p. 11) and was completed in 1906, with interior and exterior decoration completed in 1919 (Fayzi, pp. 102-4; Balyuzi, p. 110; Raʿfati, p. 8; Momen, 1991, p. 285; Hassall, p. 49; Lee, 11).

After completing the challenging task of building the Mašreq al-Adkar, Mohammad-Taqi retired to Haifa, where he spent the last two years of his life. He passed away on 30 August, 1911, at the age of eighty-one, and was the first to be buried in the Bahá'í cemetery in Haifa (H. Afnan, pp. 318-19).

Mohammad-Taqi's rich business experience, various activities, and strong devotion to his Bahai faith won him many titles. These included titles in relation to his activities for the merchant class (Malek-al-Tojjar, Wakil-al-Tojjar), for representing Russian interests in Yazd (Wakil-al-Dawla-ye Rus), for his devotion and services he rendered to his faith (Wakil-al-Haqq), and for his delightful character (Afnan-e Malih) (RSHA, "Mission in Persia," 528/1/1889-1904/1596, p. 1; ʿAbd-al-Bahaʿ, p. 126; H. Afnan, p. 316; E. Afnan, p. 19). He also received the title of "Afnan" (twigs, branches), which was given by Bahaʿ-Allah to the siblings of Fatema Begom and Kadija Begom, the Bab's mother and wife, respectively.

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