

Conspiracies and Forgeries: the attack upon the Baha'i Community in Iran

While in the early years of the history of the Baha'i Faith in Iran, the main attacks and persecutions of the community were made on the basis of religious accusations, in the twentieth century, it has increasingly been non-religious accusations that have been made the basis and justification for attacking and persecuting the community. These accusations play upon the well-known propensity of Iranian society to believe and endorse conspiracy theories. Although conspiracy theories abound in all cultures across the world, Iranian society is unusual in that conspiracy theories are not confined to marginal groups and individuals but have had widespread acceptance for most of the twentieth century. Even prominent Iranian statesmen and intellectuals succumb to a tendency to see the world in terms of conspiracies. This is perhaps not surprising in a country that was once one of the great powers of the world but then saw itself fall to a position of backwardness, experiencing defeat and disasters. A collective delusion that this was all the fault of powerful enemies was an easier option than dealing with the enormous problems the country faced.

As is usually the case with conspiracy theories, they evolve out of a handful of facts that are then cited as evidence for a widespread, all-embracing conspiracy. The embassies of Russia and Britain were undoubtedly engaged in some degree of trying to influence Iranian statesmen, they did come together finally in the Anglo-Russian Convention of 1907 that divided Iran into Russian and British spheres of influence, and the Americans did engineer the overthrow of Mosaddeq and the Shah's return to power.¹ But ascribing to these outside powers a pervasive influence over every aspect of Iranian life and blaming them for every political and social evil that occurred goes well beyond any reasonable extrapolation from these known facts. However, conspiracy theories are elaborate, internally consistent, emotionally satisfying and therefore very difficult to refute. In general, the Baha'i community has tended to fit into these conspiracy theories as the ally of whatever is the greatest threat facing Iran at any one time. The subject of the various spurious allegations that have been raised against the Baha'is is a large one and only a few examples can be given here.

During the first half of the twentieth century when Russia and Britain were great powers looming over Iran, playing the 'Great Game', vying with each other for power and influence in a country that they regarded as key to their nationalist and colonialist ambitions, the Baha'is were caught up in fantasy conspiracy theories centred on these powers. Despite the inherent improbability of such a scenario, both the British and the Russians, who were of course in reality arch-rivals of each other, were simultaneously being accused of having initiated the Babi movement.

Periodically, the collective delusion engendered by these conspiracy theories would be reinforced by forged evidence.² Accusations that the Russians had started the Babi movement were given great impetus in the 1940s with the publication of the forged *Political Confessions of Prince Dolgorouki (I'tiráfát Siyási-yi Kinyáz Dolgoruki)*. This book claimed to be the memoirs of Prince Dolgorouki who was Russian Minister in Tehran from 1845 to 1854. The location of the original manuscript on which this book is based has never been disclosed nor has it ever been published in Russian. The first that anyone knew of such a

¹ Ahmad Ashraf, 'Conspiracy Theories', *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 6:138-147; Ibid, 'The Appeal of Conspiracy Theories to Persians' *Princeton Papers* (Winter 1997) 57-88

² For a background on forgery in Iran, see the article Abolala Soudavar, 'Forgeries; 1. Introduction' in *Encyclopedia Iranica* 10:129

work was its publication in Persian at Mashhad in 1943. Shortly after its first publication in 1943, it was republished in Tehran with some of the more glaring historical errors corrected. Despite this attempt to rectify errors, the book still contains errors of fact so glaring that it is inconceivable that the real Dolgoruki could have written this work.³ With regard to Bahá'u'lláh, Dolgoruki is given to say that for a few years after his arrival in Tehran, he used to attend evening gatherings at the home of Hakím Ahmad Gílání and among his companions at those gatherings were Bahá'u'lláh and his half-brother Azal who were servants of Áqá Khán Núrí. This account is self-evidently erroneous on several counts. First, the book itself states elsewhere that Hakím Ahmad Gílání died in 1251/1835, three years before Dolgoruki's arrival in Tehran, according to the Khurasan edition. Second, Bahá'u'lláh and Azal as sons of a minister and members of the nobility would never have been servants of Áqá Khán Núrí. Third, at the suggested date (i.e. before the death of Gílání in 1835), Bahá'u'lláh would have been seventeen years of age, but Azal would only have been a child of five - hardly the sort of age that would make for suitable evening companions for senior statesmen such as Gílání and Dolgoruki. Indeed the book is very confused about the age and status of Bahá'u'lláh, the Khurasan edition describing him as a Bedouin and the Tehran edition describing him at this time as 'an old man'. The statement in the Khurasan edition that Dolgoruki provided money for Bahá'u'lláh to build a house in `Akká is changed to a house in Edirne in the Tehran edition, no doubt when someone realized that Dolgoruki was in fact dead by the time that Bahá'u'lláh was in `Akká.

Apart from serious historical errors about the Bab and Baha'u'llah, far more serious for the credibility of the book are the glaring errors in the historical details given in the book about Dolgoruki himself. The book gives the inherently improbable story that Dolgoruki first came to Iran in 1838 (Khurasan edition) or 1834 (Tehran edition), converted to Islam and set out for Karbalá to study the Islamic sciences at a religious college. For some reason that is not explained in the book, Dolgoruki now turns against Islam and meets the Báb whom he instigates to put forward his claim as a way of ruining both Iran and Islam. It is stated that Dolgoruki not only assisted the Báb in his ministry but that later he was responsible for assisting Bahá'u'lláh. It is even claimed that the writings of Bahá'u'lláh were composed by the Foreign Ministry in Russia and then sent to Bahá'u'lláh in Baghdad, Edirne and `Akká.

Unfortunately for those who concocted this forgery, they made a rather bad choice in the person whom they chose as the purported author of their work. For Prince Dolgoruki was a career diplomat from one of the most prominent families in Russia. There is an entry for him in the authoritative Russian biographical dictionary, *Russkii Biograficheski Slovar* (vol. 6, St Petersburg, 1905), and for those who do not read Russian, his diplomatic career can be followed by consulting the successive editions of almanacs and year-books such as the *Almanach de Gotha*. These show that during the years that the forged *Political Confessions* would have him in Iran and Karbala, converting to Islam and first contacting the Báb, the real Dolgoruki was at several diplomatic posts in Europe (the Hague 1832-7, Naples 1837-42, and Istanbul 1842-5). Dolgoruki was the Russian Minister in Iran from 1845-54, but unfortunately for the authors of this forged work, a Russian scholar Mikhail S. Ivanov researched the Russian diplomatic reports of Dolgoruki and had already published these as an

³ A few of these will be cited here as examples: Regarding the Báb, it is stated in the Khurasan edition of the book that when he advanced his claims, the Báb's father threw him out of the house. Realising that this was an error since the Báb's father is well-known to have died when the Báb was only a child, the Tehran edition corrects this to saying that the Bab's family threw him out. Even this correction is, however, erroneous for none of the Báb's family opposed him (even though most of them did not at that time become believers in him) and the uncle who brought him up even gave his life as a martyr in the Cause of the Báb.

addendum to a book on the Bábís that he wrote which was published in 1939 (*Babidskie vostaniya v Irani, 1848-52*, Moscow). Ivanov, who was a communist scholar and therefore himself not friendly to the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths, shows in the dispatches that he published that Dolgoruki was not even aware of the Bábí movement until about 1847, three years after it started. Even then, the information that he sends to the Russian Foreign ministry is incomplete and inaccurate.⁴ If anything, these dispatches show Dolgoruki to have been antagonistic to the Bab. Fearing that a spread of the Babi movement into Caucasia would disrupt the newly established hold that Russia had over those regions, he insisted on the Bab being moved away from Maku on the Russian border.⁵ Since Dolgoruki retired from the Russian diplomatic service in 1854 and died in 1867, it was clearly impossible for him to have later been helping Bahá'u'lláh in the ways that are described above.

Several distinguished Iranian historians and academics who are not Bahá'ís have recorded their belief that these memoirs are a forgery. Prof. `Abbas Iqbal, Professor of History at the University of Tehran, in the well-known journal of history and literature, *Yádgár*, in 1949 stated:

Concerning the matter of Prince Dolgoruki, the truth of the matter is that this is a complete fabrication and the work of some forgers. Apart from the fact that no-one knew of the existence of such a document until now, it contains so many ridiculous historical errors that these are in themselves sufficient to refute this work.⁶

A similar statement was made by Prof. Mujtabá Mínuví, Professor in the College of Divinity and Islamic Sciences of the University of Tehran, writing in the journal *Ráhnimá-yi Kitáb*: 'I am certain that these memoirs attributed to Dolgoruki are forged.'⁷ Even the famous Ahmad Kasraví of Tabriz, although he was an enemy of the Bahá'í Faith and wrote a book, *Bahá'í-garí*, attacking it, stated that these *Political Confessions* were a forgery and he even states that he knew the identity of the forger.⁸

These opinions expressed by distinguished scholars and the publication in Iran in 1345/1966 of Persian translations of the dispatches of Dolgorugov,⁹ which conclusively demonstrate the falseness of the *Political Confessions*, have not deterred the ardent conspiracy theorists. The fact that the Baha'is are unable to refute these book publically and the number of non-Baha'is daring to state the truth about this work is very small has meant that the work has lived on and continues to be used as supporting evidence for various attacks on the Baha'i Faith up to the present day.

As for the charge that the British were responsible for starting the Babi movement, this has been an accusation made by Iranian writers for much of the past century. The British were

⁴ For translations of some of the despatches of Dolgorouki, see Momen, *Bábí and Bahá'í Religions*, pp. 9-10, 71, 72-3, 75, 77-8, 92-5, 100-4, 114-24. The reports on pp. 9-10, in particular show how little Dolgorouki knew of the Bábí movement even as late as 1852.

⁵ Momen, *Bábí and Bahá'í Religions*, pp. 72-3,

⁶ *Yádgár*, 5th year, Farvardín/Urdibihisht 1328/1949, no. 8/9, p. 148

⁷ *Ráhnimá-yi Kitáb*, 6th year, Farvardín/Urdibihisht, 1342/1963, no. 1/2, p. 25-6.

⁸ *Bahá'í-garí*, Tehran, 1323, pp. 88-9

⁹ Murtida Mudarrisi, *Shaykhi-gari, Babi-gari* (2nd ed. Tehran: Furughi, 1351) 269-81

accorded a much larger role than the Russians in Iranian conspiracy theories and were credited with being able to manipulate virtually everything that happened. It was said, only half jokingly by some, that if the cook spoiled the stew in the kitchen, the British must somehow have had a hand in it. According to this view of history, the Babi upheavals were caused by the British and British agents who even instigated persecutions of the Baha'is in order to force them to act for the British.¹⁰

The role of the British in starting the Babi and Baha'i movements has also been supported by false evidence. Firaydun Adamiyyat is a prominent Iranian scholar who has written the standard biography of Nasir al-Din Shah's first Prime Minister, Mirza Taqi Khan, called *Amir Kabir va Iran*. In the first edition of this work, published in Tihiran in 1323/1944 (pp. 243-4),¹¹ Adamiyyat states that Mulla Husayn Bushru'i, the first disciple of the Bab, was in fact a British agent recruited by Arthur Conolly when he travelled through Khurasan in 1830 and that it was Mulla Husayn, acting in the British interest, who instigated the Bab to put forward his claim and who drove the movement forward. Adamiyyat claims that the supporting evidence for his account appears in Connolly's book *Journey to the North of India Overland from England through Russia, Persia, and Affghaunistaun*.¹² Of course, one can read the entirety of Conolly's book and not even find any mention of his meeting Mulla Husayn. Having been confronted over his fabrication,¹³ Adamiyyat removed this passage from subsequent editions of this book.

As the twentieth century progressed and the United States of America increasingly became the dominant world power in the Middle East, so the Baha'is were increasingly linked in to conspiracy theories centred on that country. With the establishment of the state of Israel and the increasing American support for that country, the Iranian conspiracy theorists were having a field day weaving together stories of a British-American-Zionist-Freemason conspiracy against Iran. The fact Baha'u'llah had been exiled by the Ottoman Sultan to Akka in Syria, which a century later was incorporated into the state of Israel and consequently the shrine of Baha'u'llah, the spiritual centre of the Baha'i Faith as well as its administrative centre was now located in that country, was sufficient 'evidence' for the conspiracy theorists to tie the Baha'is into this grand conspiracy.

One of the groups around which elaborate conspiracy theories have been woven are the Freemasons. Freemasonry had been introduced to Iran by Iranians who had encountered it in India and Europe. The earliest lodges, such as Malkam Khan's *faramush-khanih* (founded 1858) and the lodge initiated by Mu'in al-Mulk in 1890, were not formally affiliated to any European lodges. The first lodge to be formally affiliated (to the French Grand Orient) was established in 1906. These lodges, whether affiliated or not, served as focal points for political reformers to gather and to discuss ways of introducing and encouraging political

¹⁰ Khan Malik Sasani, *Dast-i Penhan-i Siyasat-i Engilis dar Iran* (Tehran: XXX, 1952) 100-102; Isma'il Ra'in, *Huquq Begiran Ingilis dar Iran*, (Tehran: XXX, 1967) 97-112

¹¹ Published by Bungah Adhar

¹² 2 vols., London, 1834

¹³ The present author was informed by Mr Balyuzi that when Adamiyyat came to London, Mujtaba Minovi, who was Balyuzi's colleague at the BBC's Persian Service, withdrew Conolly's book from the London Library, placed it in front of Adamiyyat and asked him to point out the passage where Conolly's meeting with Mulla Husayn occurs. Adamiyyat, realising that the game was up, pleaded with Minovi not to expose his fraud, promising to delete this passage in subsequent editions.

change in Iran.

The secretive nature of Freemasonry and its European origins made it almost inescapably a target for Iranian conspiracy theorists. Freemasonry has been regarded as a 'fifth column', introducing Western ideas into Iran and subverting Islam. It was perhaps inevitable that it would soon be linked to accusations against the Baha'i Faith. The commonest accusation is to link together Freemasonry, Judaism and the Baha'i Faith into a grand conspiracy to undermine Islam and the Iranian nation. So firm is the conviction of those who hold these conspiracy theories that they are resistant to all disconfirmations. In a book publishing documents relating to Freemasonry in Iran, the only substantive document that relates to the Baha'i Faith is the record of a discussion between a number of prominent masons, including the Grand Master of the Great Lodge (Luj-i Buzurg), Dr Ahmad `Aliyabadi. The document has Dr `Aliyabadi stating quite categorically that no Baha'is have become masons and this is repeated by others present with no-one disagreeing. Despite this clear evidence of a lack of any connection between the Baha'is and Freemasons, the comment of the editors of the book on this document is that these assertions should be discounted as it is well-known that Baha'is are members of Freemasonry lodges. The only evidence they cite for their assertion which flatly contradicts the evidence of the documents they are publishing is a statement that Dr Dhabih Qurban was a well-known Baha'i and Freemason. For this they give a reference to Fadil Mazadarani's *Zuhur al-Haqq*, vol. 8, part 1 pp. 585-89, but if one looks at these pages they contain no mention of this name and nothing about this subject at all.¹⁴

The British Foreign Office and American State Department records are freely available for all to examine. Iranians obtained access to thousands of secret American files on Iran after they stormed the American Embassy in Tehran in 1979 and published much of this. Iranian government officials have trawled in detail through all of the files of SAVAK, the Shah's secret intelligence agency, and the records of the Freemasonry Lodges in Iran, and have published much of this. If there have been a shred of evidence for a systematic Baha'i involvement with the British, the American or the Israeli governments, with Zionist or Freemason organisations or indeed with any subversive activity in Iran, one can be certain that it would have been eagerly seized upon, published and gloated over. But nothing of any substance has emerged. But this lack of evidence in no way dismays the ardent conspiracy theorist. It merely results in even more elaborate theories to account for the lack of evidence.

These accusations came increasingly to the fore in the inter-war years when a number of Baha'i apostates and others were permitted to publish books containing many false accusations against the Baha'is with no opportunity for the Baha'is to respond in print. Then after the second World War, the Tablighat-i Islami, an anti-Baha'i society, became very active publishing large numbers of anti-Baha'i tracts and books, again with no opportunity being afforded to the Baha'is to respond. As a consequence, the accusations began to seep through from these marginal publications into main-stream works, newspapers and radio. By constant repetition (and the lack of any rebuttal), they became increasingly accepted by Iranian intellectuals and the Iranian public as indubitable facts.

These accusations of a British-Russian-American-Jewish-Zionist-Freemason-Baha'i conspiracy continue up to the present day and are contained in numerous articles and books being published in Iran and outside.¹⁵ Thus it is common now to find articles by educated and

¹⁴ Mu'assisih Mutáli'át va Pazhúhishhá-yi Farhangí, *Asnad-i Faramusanri dar Iran*, 1:216-7

¹⁵ Prior to the Islamic Revolution, the main purveyors of this type of anti-Baha'i conspiracy theories were such

intelligent Iranians making statements such as the following:

The first recorded project of the British cult aristocracy was the movement of the Baha'is in Iran. Although it began as an experimental foray in nonreligious, freemason cults, the Bahai movement would spawn the organizer of the future pan-Islamic movement — Jamaledin Al-Afghani . . . During this time [when they were in Baghdad and Istanbul], the Bahai leader [*sic*] — then including Bahauallah and his son, Abdul-Baha — maintained close ties to both the British Scottish Rite [of Freemasonry] and to a proliferation of branch temples and movements spreading into India, the Ottoman Empire, Russia and even Africa . . . By the first years of the twentieth century, it was common knowledge that the Bahai was a product of British inspiration . . . Today, the Bahai cult is hated in Iran, and is considered correctly to be an arm of the British Crown. During the destabilization of the Shah in 1978, it was widely reported that in several instances the Bahai cult secretly funded the Khomeini Shiite movement . . . From 1857 until his death in 1897, [Sayyid Jamal al-Din] Al-Afghani was the chief standard bearer of the fundamentalist movement that embraced the Sufis, the Bahais and the Freemasons.¹⁶

The interesting and amazing aspect of such an account is not so much the linking of Sayyid Jamal al-Din Asadabadi 'Afghani' to the Baha'i Faith (despite the fact that he wrote a very hostile article against the Baha'i Faith in Butrus al-Bustani's Encyclopedia) or the amazing assertion that Khomeini, who strove all of his life to obliterate the Baha'is should be thought to have been funded by the Baha'is, but rather that such conspiratorial fantasies are so well accepted among Iranian intellectuals that such an article can appear, without comment, in 2003 in a journal such as *Persian Heritage*, which claims to be a serious magazine covering Iranian news and culture published in the United States.

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individuals and Khan-Malik Sasani (in his *Dast-i Penhan-i Siyasat-i Engilis dar Iran* 100-102) and Isma`il Ra'in (in his *Huquq Begiran Ingilis dar Iran* 97-112 and *Insh`ab dar Bahá'iyat* 167-174). After the Revolution, a number of writers have continued this line. Among them is `Abdu'llah Shahbazi (see his 'Justár-há'í az Táríkh-i Bahá'í-garí dar Írán' *Táríkh Mu'asar Iran* vol. 7, no. 27, 2003, 7-52). For an example of such material published outside Iran see the next note

¹⁶ David A Yazdan, 'History of Terrorism: Part 8, Muslim Brotherhood', *Persian Heritage*, no. 31, Fall 2003, 23-25