

## IRANIAN RESISTANCE TO THE ARAB RULE

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Historians in general consider the Arabs' victory in the battle of Nehavand as a sure evidence of complete Arab domination over Iran and hardly pay much attention to the subsequent Iranian resistance to the Arab rule. For example Homa Katozian who holds that "the will to resist was not lost as a result of Qadesiyeh in 636, which was, after all, a local battle. It had been lost already, the country being in continuous chaos." He adds: "The ideology of Islam was probably highly instrumental in motivating and energizing not only the conquerors but also the willing losers among the Iranians," though, as already noted, the Arab soldiers could not recite even a verse or two from the Quran and were motivated by getting booty, slaves and women for fighting the Iranians. Kaveh Farrokh even reports that Muslims were initially defeated at Bad Muta, and at Uhud. At Uhud, the Muslim defeat was due to "archers who had chosen to focus their efforts on acquiring booty," even when led by the prophet, a fact also corroborated by other writers. (p. 317). "But," Homa Katouzian claims, "the almost inexplicably swift collapse of this great empire must be attributed to the lack of will to uphold or support the disintegrating and unpopular state." (*The Persians: Ancient, Mediaeval and Modern Iran*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London 2009, p. 65). In contrast, Elton L. Daniel has devoted a book for detailing the degree and extent of resentment of Iranians against the Arab rule in general and amongst the rural population in particular even a hundred years after the Arab conquest. (pp. 125-156): *The Political and Social History of Khurasan under Arab Rule, 767-820*, Bibliotheca Islamica, Minneapolis and Chicago, 1979. Some writers such as Kaveh Farrokh provide an extensive chapter on Iranian resistance as well as rebellions against the Arab rule. (*The Armies of Ancient Persia: The Sassanians*, Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword, Military, 20 pp. 315-343.) In keeping with my goal of ensuring neutrality on the subject, I prefer to quote Kaveh Farrokh's findings verbatim at length on this subject to supplement what I have already noted on this subject: "Rebellions did break out despite the finality of the Arabo-Islamic conquests; much of the Iranian population refused to submit to the caliphates. Though conquered, Iranian cultural identity and military culture continued to endure. This may explain why the Ummayyad Caliphate (661-750 CE) had instituted a number of discriminatory anti-Iranian measures aimed at the elimination of Persian language and culture. Arab sources even report of harsh measures taken against citizens daring to speak Persian

in public. Non-Arabs were considered as an inferior race with Clawson noting that the Iranians' chafed under Arab rule'. While Arabic culture and language began to dominate ancient Egypt, North Africa, Syria, Mesopotamia and even Arab-occupied Spain by the tenth century the Iranians resisted cultural assimilation, resulting in a number of anti-caliphate (Ummayyad and Abbasid) revolts. These have been recorded by Arab historians, notably Ali Ibn Ahmad Ibn Hazm (994-1064 CE), who notes in his *Al Fasl fil Milal Ahwz n Nibal* that the 'Persians...were greater than all of the people after their defeat by the Arabs, they (the Persians) rose up to fight against Islam...among their leaders were Sunbadh (Sindbad), kMuquanna, Ustasis, Baba (Khorramdin) and others.' Negative Iranian sentiments against the caliphates forced Arabization policies are evident as late as the eleventh century, when the Iranian poet Firdowsi (940-1020 CE), in his epic *Shahname*, quoted an Iranian general fighting against the invading Arabs as having stated 'Damn this world, damn this time, damn this fate, that uncivilized Arabs have come to make me Muslim.'

## **Resistance in Central Asia: Early 700-Late 740s**

The practice of a local variant of Zoroastrianism remained strong in Central Asia.

The caliphate dispatched an Arab force led by al-Harashi, who engaged in both a military and a 'punishment' campaign to ensure that the local populace would never again dare rise against the Arab rule. One of al-Harashi's notable actions was the killing of up to 3000 Karzani farmers in Khojand for their pro-Soghdian sympathies. Al-Harashi then focused his military campaign against the main Soghdian force led by a leader known as Divashtich. Located approximately 120km from Panjikent, Abargar/Mug was Divashtich's main base for his anti-Arab campaign. Al-Harashi defeated the Soghdians and captured Divashtich, who was executed in the autumn of 722 CE. Had Pirouz's original campaign in the late 600s CE succeeded in reaching Central Asia, he may have been able to link up with the local Iranic Population to support them against the caliphate and enlist their support for his drive into Iran proper.

Despite the punitive campaigns, Central Asian sentiments against the caliphate remained undimmed. Just six years after the death of Divashtich, a new rebellion broke out in the entirety of Transoxiana in 728 CE. In that same year (728 CE) the Arabs were driven out of most of Central Asia. The combined Arab force engaged in very heavy combat for several months, managing to capture Samarquand by the spring of 730 CE).

Fighting against the Arabs continued to intensify into 736-737 CE. A major battle occurred in 737 CE at the left bank of the Amu Darya river. The latter prevailed but the Arabs had to continue combat into 748 CE before being able to re-impose their occupation. The new governor of Khorasan Nast bin Sayyar attempted to win over the local populace by grating concessions to local elites, but these measures failed to stem the prevailing anti-Arab discontent in the population, sentiments echoed in northern Persia.

### **The Rise of the Abbasids and Exploits of Abu-Muslim Khorasani (747-755 CE)**

By 747-748 CE, Abu Muslim Khorasani (an Iranian leader allied to the Abbasids) succeeded in rallying the Iranian population of Khorasan and Transoxiana against the Ummayyads in favor of the Abbasids. The Abbasids showed little interest in addressing the national aspirations and prevailing discontent of their Iranian regions. It was in eastern Iran (especially Khorasan) where antipathy against the Abbasid caliphate became exceptionally marked. In practice, very little had changed for the Iranian population as the Abbasids were just as determined to regain Arab dominance, just as their Ummayyad predecessors had done.

Despite his loyalty to the Abbasids, the latter ordered the execution of Abu Muslim Khorasani in 755 CE. The Abbasids had cynically exploited Abu Muslim and the Khorasanis in the battle to overthrow the Umayyads. Having used the Iranians to reach their objective of seizing the caliphate, the Abbasids betrayed their former comrades' national ambitions. With their political power and military power secure in Baghdad, the recently installed Abbasid Caliphate now perceived Abu Muslim and his Iranian followers as expendable. As with the Ummayyads, the Iranians were again oppressed. Abu Muslim Khorasani was evidently viewed as a dangerous liability for the caliphate as he retained the potential for leading the Iranian population in a dangerous anti-Abbasid revolt.

### **Khorasan and Central Asia: The Sinbad and Muquanna Anti-Abbasid Rebellions**

The success of Muquanna in attracting support for his cause is seen in one remarkable example where over sixty villages declared their collective allegiance for the new rebellion. Bukhara soon fell to the Muquanna rebels, known as 'the people in white clothes' (as these wore white clothes and carried white banners), in contrast to the Abbasids whose banners and clothing were black.

Muqanna's rebellion continued unabated, reaching the height of its power by 777 CE. By this time the rebels had swept the Arabs out of the Kashka Darya valley, the Derafshan valley, and areas further southward to Termez.

More battles ensued with the Arabs finally capturing the Sanam fortress by the summer of 780 CE. The Arab victors now proceeded to punish the survivors of Sanam fortress by putting them all to death; Muquanna refused to surrender to the Arabs and committed suicide.

Despite having crushed Sindbad and Muquanna yet another rebellion broke out in Central Asia in 806. Led by Rafi bin Laith from Soghdia, the movement was defeated by the Arabs four years later in 810. It was only the establishment of an indigenous Iranian dynasty (the Samanids) in the Central Asian region that led to the waning of anti-caliphate resistance. Nevertheless, anti-Arab sentiments remained especially strong in the Iranian interior. One example is the serious revolt by a local Mazdakite during the reign of Caliph Harun al-Rashid (r. 786-809 CE) in Iran's interior (esp. Isfahan) northwest (esp. Hamedan) and Rayy towards the north. The Caliph's delegates suppressed this revolt with great brutality. While the caliphate was able to suppress Iranian military resistance in the Iranian interior, northern Iran and Azerbaijan would prove more difficult to subdue.

### **Military Legacy of the Sassanian Spah: Battles in Northern Persia (650s-early 800s CE)**

Even as Arab authority was established a century after the conquest of Iran, many of the local north Iranian post-Sassanian princes remained defiant. Just one century after the conquest of Sassanian Iran, a neo-Mazdakite rebellion had broken out in Gorgan in 778-779 CE. The Gorgan rebels had fought alongside the followers of a pre-Islamic cult known as the Bateni who are distinguished by their red banners.

Early Dailamite rulers even exhibited extreme anti-Muslim attitudes and sought the restoration of the Persian empire and of the ancient religions. Islamic sources make clear that northern Iran was one of those territories deemed as the enemy of Islam. This raises questions as to why the Arabs were unable to militarily prevail in northern Iran. There are at least two general reasons why this was the case: climate and the close quarters combat skills of the northern Iranian population. The Arabs had difficulty coping with the local terrain and weather, which differs from the Middle East climates, especially during the winter.

## Vendidad-Hormuz

The case of Vendidad-Hormuz of northern Persia is of interest as much information has been provided by Ibn Isfandyar's *History of Tabaristan*.

One of these pertains to a major battle between Vendidd-Hormuz and the forces of Caliph al-Mahdi (r. 775-785 CE) numbering 10,000 troops. Ibn Isfandyar has provided the following description of the battle:

[W]hen the Arabs reached Tabaristan the people, altogether 4,000 in total, hid in the high mountain tops and the local forests with 400 horns, 400 drums and Tabar [axe] and Dahra [local type of very sharp north Iranian scythe]... Vendidad with 100 Savar [as in Savaran cavalry] appeared in front of the Arabs and engaged in attack and pursuit [tactics] drawing them to areas already designated [where the 4,000 fighters were ensconced]. Then all of a sudden 4,000 Tabaristanis engaged in the percussion of large drums and 400 horns which made the Arabs think that the dawn of judgement was at hand ... then 4,000 cut-down trees were cast upon their heads [the Arabs]. Then they [Tabaristani or Dailamites] drew out their swords and from the outset massacred 2,000 of the Arabs ... Ferasha [the Arab commander] was apprehended and beheaded...the remaining Arabs were released. Vendidad soon joined forces with Sherwin Ispadbodh (lit. 'Spah Commander') against the caliphate. Ibn Isfandyar avers that Sherwin 'would not allow the Muslims [caliphate troops] to be buried in the soil of ... Tabaristan.

## Babak Khorramdin in Azerbaijan (816-837 CE) – The Caliphate's Greatest Challenge

According to Tabari both Vendidad and Sherwin later accepted the caliphate's authority after a massive counterattack by the latter captured a number of fortresses by the early 800s CE but in practice northern Persia remained one of the least Islamicized regions of the caliphate. In addition, the caliphate had yet to destroy the military potential of northern Persia. This is evidenced by the rise of the Buyid Dailamite dynasty in the 930s CE which seized control over much of Iran until the arrival of the Seljuk Oghuz Turks in the 11 century CE. Especially significant was the support of northern Iran to Babak

Khorramdin in Azerbaijan against the caliphate by the 830s CE.

Babak Khorramdin's movement (816-837 CE) was the most dangerous military threat posed by an Iranian rebellion against the caliphate. This movement came closest to ejecting the caliphate from not only Azerbaijan but from all Iranian realms. Babak was the leader of the *Khorram-dinam* (Persian *Xorramdinan*: 'Those Who Follow the Joyful Religion') sect which was an Iranian movement based on the teachings of the pre-Islamic religion of Mazdakism. The Khorram-dinan was initially a mystical sect whose followers shunned violence, but with Babak's determination to liberate Iran from the caliphate, the movement's pacifism gave way to a warrior ethos.

### **Babak's Bazz castle in Azerbaijan.**

Babak's base of operations against the caliphate was the Bazz castle in Azerbaijan. Bazz remains a formidable site, with many of its structures surviving to the present. Bazz was built on an elevation of approximately 2,500m and surrounded by deep and narrow crevices (approximately 500m in depth). These crevices were flanked by rocky walls which made attacks against the castle extremely difficult. This prevented the caliphate from bringing its numerical advantage to bear as the narrow defiles severely limited the number of troops that could be deployed against Bazz. Infantry in the initial states of attacking would be channeled into the narrow rocky passes and be highly vulnerable to the ambushes and counterattacks of Babak's fighters. Attackers approaching Bazz had to cross a single narrow and meandering defile to then traverse a very narrow corridor, just one person wide. As a result, attacking caliphate forces at Bazz could be easily staved off with modest numbers of fighters. These same crevices, narrow passes and steep climbs negated any advantages posed by caliphate cavalry and also made the deployment of siege engines exceedingly difficult. The caliphate also could not attack in winter due to the region's very heavy snowfalls and dense rains. (p.339). However, here Kaveh Farrokh seems to contradict his earlier contention on p. 336 that the Arabs had no difficulty in coping with local terrain in bad weather.

### **Babak defeats the armies of the caliphate (813-833 CE)**

Babak's rebellion began in 813 CE. The first to rally to Babak's banner were mainly the local Azerbaijani farming population. The farmers were exhorted by Babak to fight against the caliphate as warriors and to kill their opponents in battle. By 818-819 CE, Babak

and his warriors had cleared Azerbaijan's castles, strategic passes and strongholds of Arab/caliphate troop.

As word went out of Babak's successes against the caliphate, volunteer fighters streamed into Azerbaijan from all across the Iranian realms. Large numbers of anti-caliphate fighters came from the north (Rayy, Karaj, Qom, Tabaristan), northwest (i.e. Hamedan), Central Asia (esp. Balkh), the interior (i.e. Isfahan and Kashan), Khorasan in the northeast, the west (Luristan and many Kurds) and even from Basra (in modern southern Iraq). Armenia, already ripe for rebellion, was also home to members of the Khorramdin. Babak's followers in Armenia would also launch a number of attacks against local caliphate garrisons during the three decade rebellion.

Babak's victories against five major caliphate armies in 816-813 CE had shattered the myth of Arab military superiority and finally given rise to hopes that Iran would finally be liberated. News of Babak's victories continued to galvanize fighters from across Iran to join the anti-caliphate rebellion in Azerbaijan.

### **Caliph al-Motassem and the Battle of Hamedan (833-836 CE).**

Babak had seized control of a vast swathe of territory ranging from Ardabil and Marand in the west and on the Caspian Sea to the east as well as Moghan and Jolfa in the north; even Shirvan and Shamakhi to the north of the Araxes River in the Caucasus were now under Babak's sway. With Azerbaijan and portions of the Caucasus already broken away, Caliph Motassem now faced the possibility of other parts of Iran seceding from the caliphate. As noted previously, the caliphate had been facing serious challenges to its authority in northern Persia.

### **Declaration of alliance between Maziyar and Babak.**

By the ninth century CE the Dailamite region (or Tabaristan) had witnessed the rise of Maziyar an Iranian prince of the House of Karen. Maziyar had been confirmed as governor of northern Persia by al-Mamoun just before his death in 833 CE. Maziyar is believed to have had a personal guard of 1200 Dailamite warriors commanded by his brother Shahriyar. Like Babak, Maziyar endeavoured to revive the culture, customs and religion of pre-Islamic Iran. Maziyar who was in communication with Babak in Azerbaijan further west, had also forged an official alliance with him by 837 CE. Their aim was to eject the Arabs not just from Azerbaijan and the Iranian north but from the entire Iranian realm and to revive the former Sassanian Empire and

the Zoroastrian religion. Ibn Isfandiyar has noted that Maziyar proclaimed, 'I [Maziyar], Afshin Kheydar son of Kavus and Babak made a pact and alliance to take back the government from the Arabs and give it back to the Kasraviyan [Sassanians].'

Despite these ambitions, the Maziyar-Babak alliance achieved little. Babak's anti-caliphate rebellion was crushed in 837 CE (see below) with Maziyar having little capability to militarily support his ally. Maziyar was then betrayed by his brother Kuhyar, who surrendered him over to the caliphate. The northern Iranian rebel was bought to Baghdad for execution where he died in 839 CE. It is unclear however, if Maziyar took his own life to avoid humiliation at Arab hands while awaiting execution or if he actually was executed.

Caliph Motassem appointed Afshin as governor of Azerbaijan and the chief general to lead the caliphate's final military campaigns against Babak and the Iranian rebels in August 835 CE. Afshin is an infamous figure in Iranian history; he is known as the Iranian general who betrayed Iran's last hope for independence from the caliphate.

While Afshin was a loyal soldier of the caliphate, he never completely abandoned his Iranian identity. Zarrinkoub has noted that numbers of Iranian princes did serve the caliphate for personal and material interests. Afshin was certainly given great financial favour by Motassem, especially in the provision of generous payments for the general and his officers. When Afshin achieved military successes against Babak I 836-837 CE Motassem granted great gifts such as the daily dispatch of robes of honour and horses, jewels, a crown, etc. Much favour was also lavished by the caliph on the Turkish troops assisting Afshin. Despite these factors, Afshin's role (and loyalties) are difficult to ascertain. While true that Afshin was instrumental in crushing Babak's rebellion 836-837 CE, he is also cited by Maziyar as aspiring to restore Iran's political and cultural independence from the Caliphate. Afshin appears to have entertained secret communications with both Baba and Maziyar, one of many facts that later surfaced and led to his fall from grace with the caliphate. Afshin was put on trial in 841 CE and accused by his enemies of having 'pro-Iranian sympathies especially with respect to ancient Iranian culture and theology.

## **The caliphate strikes back (835-836 CE).**

Mamoun had already begun the practice of regularly dropping Arabs from the caliphate's military registry to replace these with Turkish (mainly) slave troops. Motassem fully inducted the Turks into the caliphate's armies at the expense of the Arabs. The Turks were to play a critical role in destroying Babak's rebellion in 836-837 CE.

Babak remained defiant but the Iranian cause was ultimately doomed as Afshin's methodical military campaign began to slowly bear fruit. Afshin had implemented highly effective cavalry patrols against the rebels, forcing Babak to launch desperate attacks. These continuous clashes wore down Babak's military strength, allowing Afshin to draw closer to Bazz castle. Afshin's strategy succeeded in bottling up Babak and the last of the rebels at Bazz.

### **Bazz falls to Caliphate's Turkish troops (837 CE).**

It was in August 837 CE when Afshin unleashed his final assault at Bazz. Siege engines and naphta throwers unleashed their deadly barrages against Bazz's defenders, entrance gates and defense structures. The caliphate's professional Turkish troops succeeded in scaling Bazz's walls to engage in fierce hand to hand combat against Babak's surviving defenders. The mainly Turkish troops captured Bazz and hoisted the caliphate's banners on 15 August 837 CE. Afshin then freed 7,600 Arab prisoners who had been held captive in the castle. Caliphate troops then looted and destroyed Bazz on Afshin's orders. Babak and his rebellion had been extinguished. He was captured in Armenia in September 837 CE and executed in Samara (in modern Iraq in January 838 CE).

### **Babak's Enduring Legacy: Rise of Shah Ismail and the Safavids**

Had Babak's decades-long rebellion succeeded, Iran could well have broken out of the caliphate's grasp towards independence and revived its ancient pre-Islamic religions. Nevertheless, the caliphate failed to destroy Iran's distinct (non-Arab) identity and culture. The Khorramdin movement in particular was not destroyed with many of its survivors becoming gradually absorbed into various Islamic sects. Other survivors of Babak's movement fled westwards, towards Byzantium, where Byzantine sources talk of Persian warriors seeking refuge in the 830s from the caliph's armies by taking service under the Byzantine emperor Theophilos.

The Khorramdinin sect and its Mazdakite/Zoroastrian ideas would in fact endure well into the 1500s when Shah Ismail and the Safavids took over Iran and restored her full independence as an Iranian state.

Turkish historian and scholar Abdulkaki Golpinarli concurs that the Qizlbash warriors who bought Shah Ismail to power in Iran in 1501CE were the spiritual descendants of Babak Khorramdin and the Khorram-dinan who had risen in Azerbaijan to fight for Iran's

independence six centuries before. Despite having been a devote Shiite Muslim, Shah Ismail in fact had strong ties to Iran's Yazdani (lit. Cult of Angels) which is essentially the descendant of ancient Iranian cults such as Mithraism, Zurvanism, and Mazdakism. Mary Boyce asks: Can the Zoroastrian beliefs "be held to match in strength the secular power conferred on the Iranian religion in that epoch 215 and offers a mighty response: "One weighty piece of evidence to show that they can is that Zoroastrianism has survived, though with cruelly diminished numbers, (Which if I may interject was mainly due to inculpably cruel persecution meted out to them for almost 1400 years in their own native land), down to the present day: and this is true only of it and of Judaism, out of all the many religions of the ancient Near East." (*Zoroastrianism: A Shadowy But Powerful Presence in the Judaeo-Christian World*, Dr. Williams' Trust, London, 1987, p. 3).

The reader can thus decide for himself or herself whether the Iranians had already lost the will to fight by the initial Arab victories and whether the Islamic ideology energized even "the willing losers among the Iranians."

## The Saffarids

What Bosworth comment about the Saffarid dynasty supports the view that the Iranian internally resented the Arab rule:

"It is not perhaps surprising that modern Persian authors and historians have regarded the rise of the Saffarids as a manifestation of the Persian renaissance after the eclipse of Persian political independence and of cultural life during the two centuries or so of Arab rule following the conquests of the first/seventh century. Yahya Armajani in 1960 spoke of the nationalistic feelings of the Persian people being directed permanently, over a thousand years, against the same target, sc. The historical event of the Arab conquest. Within these feelings the Saffarids were the first independent dynasty to challenge the Arab dominion by open warfare, to regard with favour religious dissidents like the Kharjites and to spearhead the renaissance of New Persian language and literature. The impetus which the Saffarids gave to this process was so strong that it set the pattern for Persian national feeling to express itself in the form of anti-Arabism; hence Armajani states, "Because of this spirit the Persians are *in* the Islamic work but not *of* it ... They always look with nostalgia across thirteen hundred years to pre-Islamic Iran ... the Persians still boast of Cyrus and Darisu ... They are proud of Zoroastrianism which they do not accept, and accept Islam of which they do not seem enthusiastic. Their heart is still in the ruins of Persepolis". Such sentiments reflect the emphasis of the Pahlavi era of

modern Persia when a specifically Iranian nationalism was cultivated and the Islamic religious factor in modern Persian life was downplayed; they make wry reading in the light of events in Persia since 1979." (pp. 172-3).

Abdolhossein Zarrinkoab makes a similar claim for the Tahirid dynasty which is reviewed separately.

In his other work, "The Kūfichīs or Qufş in Persian History",<sup>1</sup> Bosworth reiterates: "The Jabal Bariz is mentioned as being until the early Abbasid period a stronghold of Zoroastrianism, and as being only really penetrated by outsiders in the time of the Saffarids Ya'qub and 'Amr b. Laith (see above); the ancient inhabitants of these mountains are probably to be identified with (those people) who paid tribute to Darius and who supplied infantry contingents to Zerxes' army, according to Herodotus, iii, 72, vii, 68, 86. In the 4<sup>th</sup>/10<sup>th</sup> century, the Kufichis and Baluch seem to have been nominally Muslim (p. VIII-13).

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1 *Iran*, Vol. 14 (1976), pp. 9-17.