

The Attempted Assassination of Nasir al-Din Shah in 1852: Millennialism and Violence

Moojan Momen

The Babi movement, begun by Sayyid `Ali Muhammad, the Bab (1819-1850), clashed with the religious and political authorities in Iran soon after its start in 1844. Despite the fact that the Bab always stressed the highest ethical principles and never incited his followers to violence, there were a series of armed clashes between the Babis and government forces between 1848 and 1850, when the Bab himself was executed. This paper focusses on the episode in 1852 when a small group of Babis attempted to assassinate the Shah.

This paper gives an account of the events of 1852, bringing to the fore a document that has not been previously used and which sheds a different light on the events immediately prior to the attempted assassination. In the official Iranian government reports at the time of the episode and in most later historical accounts, Shaykh `Ali Turshizi, known as `Azim, is accused of being the main ring-leader of the assassination plot. While the present account supports that to a certain extent, it also shows that in the last few days before the attempt, control of the group was wrested away from `Azim by Husayn Jan Milani, a charismatic leader, who appears to have had a great ability to enthral his audience and who was probably responsible for setting off a poorly planned and ill-considered attack which failed.

In this paper, we examine the factors that led to this attempt on the life of the shah in the context of the study of millennialist groups and violence, a field that has recently come to fore following episodes such as the Waco siege in 1993 and the sarin gas release by the Aum Shinrikyo group in Tokyo in 1995. Apart from the above factor of a charismatic leader, a number of other factors leading towards violence within the Babi group who carried out this attack are discussed in this paper: the mythical context (the parallels drawn in the minds of the Babis between their situation and the martyrdom of the Imam Husayn), the theological context (the doctrine of Return enunciated by the Bab which reinforced the mythical context), the experience of persecution (which in many millennialist groups is the immediate precursor to violence) and the removal of restraining influences (the successive removal of leaders who might have prevented the group from proceeding down the path towards violence).