

Article

The Reform Movement in Isfahan, Iran: The Role of Bábís and Bahá'ís

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Abstract

This paper seeks to analyze and reassess the reform movement in Isfahan in the years leading up to the Constitutional Revolution in Iran, 1883–1906. In the first period, 1883–1906, two Azalí Bábís from Kirman, Shaykh Aḥmad Rúhí and Mírzá Áqá Khán Kirmání, joined Sayyid Yahyá Dawlatábádí to form a group in Isfahan, although the evidence that they discussed much about reform is limited. The second period, 1886–1903, saw an active circle of reformers formed in Isfahan led by such figures as Maliku'l-Mutakallimín, Sayyid Jamálu'd-Dín Vá'iz and Majdu'l-Islám Kirmání and including about twelve other individuals. Each of these two periods ended with a persecution that drove the leading reformers out of Isfahan. Thus in the third phase, 1903–1906, a conservative governor Zillu's-Sultán and reactionary clerics, led by Áqá Najafí, dominated Isfahan, having eliminated all discussion of reform. The second phase occupies most of the attention of this paper, especially since it is suggested that a revision is needed of some previous accounts of this period. It is the thesis of this paper that the evidence presented demonstrates that the main actors in this period were not Azalí Bábís as is usually stated but were either Bahá'ís or persons actively engaged with the Bahá'í community.

Keywords: Babi; Baha'i; Azali; constitutional revolution; Isfahan; reform in Iran; Qajar Iran

1. Introduction

Iran in the late nineteenth century was sinking into powerlessness and poverty, not helped by the self-centeredness and close-mindedness of its governing elite and the ineffectiveness and chaos of its governance. Náṣiru'd-Dín Sháh, as the autocratic head of state, lurched from intending to reform the state to reacting against all reform, having neither the desire to expend the time and effort needed for meaningful change nor the resolve to carry through with his stated intentions. Moreover, the shah regarded the country as his personal possession, to be mulcted of as much wealth as possible. Most governorships and other official positions were sold to the highest bidder regardless of that person's record or capacities. Minimal amounts were spent to benefit the people or the country's infrastructure. According to the figures for 1888–9, 44% of the government's expenditure was given to the shah or to Qájár princes or as pensions to various officials, 43% was spent on the army, 6% was spent on government officials and on diplomatic missions; only 1% was spent on education and 0.5% on repair and maintenance.¹

After the defeats at the hands of the Russians in the early nineteenth century, the government of Iran had woken up to how far Iran had fallen behind Europe since Safavid times and the need for a modernization of the country. Initially there was a somewhat superficial, instrumentalist response. The Crown Prince 'Abbás Mírzá (1799–1833) brought in European military trainers for his troops and the Prime Minister Mírzá Taqí Khán (1807–1852,



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later called Amír Kabír) built a college in Tehran (Dáru'l-Funún, inaugurated in 1851) again mainly for military purposes (although it had some trainers in fields such as medicine, even these were ancillary to military purposes).

It was not until some decades had passed that a few scattered individuals began to write about social and political reform in Iran. At first there were only implied suggestions for reform in the accounts of travellers to India and Europe (for example, Mírzá Šálih Shírází, who studied in England in 1815–19). Publishing in Iran was in its earliest stages of development and so such accounts at first had a very limited circulation in manuscript form as did the earliest treatises appearing in the 1860s making concrete proposals for change from such reformers as Mírzá Fath 'Alí Akhúndzádih (Akhundov, 1812–1878), who focussed on language and education reform and was an atheist and highly anti-clerical. The first such treatise to be published was probably *Yik Kalamih* (1870) by Mírzá Yúsif Khán Mustasháru'd-Dawlih (d. 1895), who was focused on law and governance. He was part of a reformist government led by Prime Minister Mírzá Husayn Khán Mushíru'd-Dawlih (1828–1881) who tried in 1871 to establish a government based on a cabinet of ministers and consultative decision-making. However, even this modicum of a move away from autocracy was too much for a reactionary Qajar elite and an irresolute and easily distracted shah, leading to Mushíru'd-Dawlih's dismissal as Prime Minister in 1873 and the gradual sidelining of all efforts at modernization. Although discussion of reform continued among intellectuals and among some in government circles, with occasional bouts of unrest such as occurred after the granting of a concession to run the tobacco industry to a foreigner in 1891, there was very little in the way of social or political change for the rest of the nineteenth century.²

The religion of the vast majority of Iranians in the nineteenth century was Twelver Shi'ism. At the beginning of this century, the Uşúlí school of Twelver Shi'ism had become predominant. This school gave those clerics who had gone through the religious education system and achieved the rank of *mujtahid* almost unlimited powers to make religious rulings on all religious, social and even governmental affairs. The question at issue in most locations was whether the clerics could get their rulings enforced. If there was resistance to the cleric's ruling from individuals, most major clerics had a large group of students, allies (often members of a local gymnasium, *zúr-kháníh*) and street ruffians who would form a mob and immediately carry out the cleric's ruling. But if the cleric was going up against a local governor (if for example, the local governor had made a decision that the clerics perceived to be against their interests), then it was a matter of where the balance of power lay. A cleric might send his mob into the bazaar and close it down with threats of violence. If he felt powerful enough, he might even send his mob to attack the palace of the governor. If the national government made a decision that the clerics considered to be against their interests, then the clerics in several major cities would cause similar disturbances in an effort to overturn the government's decision. Of course, the language of the clerics in these cases would center on the fact that the government's decision was contrary to Islam.

The situation in Isfahan in the period under consideration in this article (the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth) was very much as described in the previous paragraph.³ In May 1874, Zilu's-Sultán (Sultán Mas'úd Mírzá, 1850–1918) became governor of Isfahan and remained in this position for 33 years (until 1907). He was the eldest son of the shah but because his mother had not been a Qájár princess, he was excluded from the succession to the throne. His principal preoccupation was to reverse this exclusion and gain the throne.⁴ The year 1874 also saw a major change in the clerical power structure of Isfahan. With the death of Sayyid Asadu'lláh Rashtí in February of that year and of the Imám-Jum'ih Mír Muḥammad Sultánu'l-'Ulamá in September, clerical power shifted to Shaykh Muḥammad Báqir Najafí (or Masjid-Sháhí, 1235/1819–83)⁵ and

his son Áqá Najafí (Shaykh Muḥammad Taqí, 1846–1914).⁶ As an indication of their power, it was said that Áqá Najafí had 5000 students and others in his pay (Malikzádih 2004, vol. 1, p. 72). During the time of famine, they hoarded grain and sold it to the starving population at inflated prices.⁷ When the mayor of Isfahan (*ra'is-i baladiyyih*), Hájí Muḥammad Ja'far, protested that people were dying of hunger and they had tons of grain in storage, they accused him of being a “Bábí” and had him executed.⁸

And so, in the period with which this paper is concerned, Isfahan had two poles of power, the governor Zillu's-Sultán and the Najafí family represented by Shaykh Muḥammad Báqir until his exile in 1882 and death in 1883, and then by Áqá Najafí. Usually, these two poles would be at loggerheads with each side anxious to demonstrate its power over the other. There were financial implications to this struggle, since it could have an effect on whether the citizens of the city paid government taxes or religious taxes. Occasionally these two poles would unite against a third party and that was usually against the reformers and the Bahá'ís, which, as will be suggested in this paper, were one entity from the viewpoint of these two poles of power. Towards the end of this period, in about 1906, Áqá Najafí's brother, Áqá Núrulláh, came to fore (possibly as a result of Áqá Najafí's failing health), and shortly thereafter came the downfall of Zillu's-Sultán in 1907 just after the Constitutional Revolution.

The Bábí movement began in 1844 when the Báb (Sayyid 'Alí Muḥammad Shírází, 1819–1850) put forward a claim. This claim at first appeared to be that he was the representative of the Hidden Twelfth Imám, whom Iranian Shi'is expected to return as a messianic figure. However, even from the start of his mission with his first book, it was clear that he was effectively making a much greater claim. Over the next six years, it became apparent that he was claiming to bring a new revelation from God, a new book and a new law, superseding Islam. The Báb thus began a process that continued with Bahá'u'lláh (Mírzá Ḥusayn 'Alí Núrí, 1817–1892), who claimed to be the prophetic figure announced by the Báb and thus founded a new religion, the Bahá'í Faith.⁹ Bahá'u'lláh's teachings led to the emergence of a new community that gradually developed in ways that were counter to many of the features of Iranian life. A new religious imaginary dispensed with professional religious leaders and replaced the focus on the legalism of the Shari'ah with a focus on individual moral and spiritual development and the betterment of society (especially through education and united action). A new social imaginary gradually moved the Bahá'í community from the hierarchical structure of most social formations to a new social dynamic that removed the need for the leadership of individuals and moved instead towards consultative decision-making and collaborative social action. Among the features of the community's new social dynamics, there developed an enhanced role for women, an importance given to social justice and a great emphasis on education (Momen 2025).

However, the move from the Bábí movement to the Bahá'í religion was not a smooth one. Bahá'u'lláh was opposed by his half-brother Azal (Mírzá Yahyá Núrí, 1831–1912), who claimed leadership of the Bábí community. A small minority of Bábís gathered around Azal and thus became called Azalís or Azalí Bábís, and they were greatly opposed to the Bahá'ís. While the Bahá'í community focussed on grass-roots community building and development and eschewed political involvement, the Azalís focussed on influencing the political process so as to achieve political aims. In other words, the Bahá'ís were focussed on a bottom-up organic change in Iranian society and the Azalís on a top-down political imposition of change.

The Bahá'í community of Isfahan experienced periodic outbursts of persecution, occasionally against specific individual Bahá'ís (as for example with the execution of two wealthy Bahá'í merchant brothers in 1879, Momen 2021, pp. 17–23) and sometimes against the whole community (as occurred during the first year of Zillu's-Sultán's governorship in

1874, Momen 2021, pp. 15–17). By this time the motives for these persecutions were not so much religious as local power politics and greed. As Walcher (2008, p. 118) has stated in the case of the persecutions of individual Bahá'ís “as well as the outright pogroms instigated chiefly by Shaykh Muḥammad Bāqir and later Āqā Najafī, political calculation in the fight for religious supremacy, personal gain, as well as financial gain were legitimated on the grounds of religious dogma, the prerogatives of orthodox theology, and the safeguard of Islām against corruption by heretics and the West.”

The discourse of the reformers centred, as is demonstrated in this paper, on such areas as modern education, the elimination of corruption and constraining the retrogressive influence of the Islamic clerics.¹⁰ The Bahá'ís had also been advocating for these areas of reform since at least the early 1870s.¹¹ Hence it is not surprising that there was a certain merging of the two in the public discourse. As will be discussed in this article, this merging was not just in the public's imaginary, there was also a real merging of the two on the ground, at least in Isfahan. There were, however, differences between the approach of the two groups. The reformers were focussed on influencing the political process in order to attain their desired reforms; the Bahá'í community was focussed on individual transformation and grass-roots social action as the pathway to social reform. This difference mirrors the difference between the Bahá'ís and the Azalís described above. In Isfahan during the 1890s and up to 1903, the possibility of influencing the political process was shut down and the reformers and Bahá'ís held mixed private meetings and discussed their various ideas. However, in Tehran over the same period, where there was a more public debate and a greater possibility of influence on the political process (especially during the premiership of Amínu'd-Dawlih in 1897–8), the reformers gravitated towards the Azalís who were similarly focussed on political change as a way of bringing about reform.

2. The First Phase of the Reform Movement, 1883–1886

When the split between Bahá'u'lláh and Azal occurred in 1866, unlike most other towns in Iran where Bahá'u'lláh quickly prevailed, there was a significant split in the Bábí community of Isfahan. Most of the Bábís of Isfahan accepted Bahá'u'lláh's claim, including the prominent and wealthy Nahrí family of merchants, Āqá Sayyid 'Abdur-Raḥím Iṣfahání and Hájí Muḥammad Riḍá, both also prominent merchants, Zaynu'l-Muqarrabin, a mujtahid of Najafábád, and Hájí Mírzá Ḥaydar 'Alí, an active Bahá'í propagandist. A few of the Bábís of Isfahan including some prominent figures such as Mullá Rajab 'Alí Qahír, his brother Mullá 'Alí Muḥammad Siráj and another figure, Sayyid Muḥammad Iṣfahání, sided with Azal, but by the time the split occurred in 1866, they had all left Isfahan. The leading Azalí Bábí in Isfahan in 1866 was Hájí Mírzá Hádí Dawlatábádí (1257/1841–1326/1908). He also left the Isfahan area from 1873 to 1877, when he went to Najaf and Karbalá and obtained a certificate of *ijtihád*. On his return, he became a religious authority in the Aḥmadábád district of the city as well as in his home village of Dawlatábád (then about 13 kilometres north of Isfahan). His Bábí beliefs became known and he came under pressure. At first Zillu's-Sultán supported him, hoping he would be an ally against Shaykh Muḥammad Bāqir, but by about 1880 had turned against him. This allowed Shaykh Muḥammad Bāqir to force Dawlatábádí to leave Isfahan for Mashhad and Tehran from 1880 until 1882, when Dawlatábádí was able to return because Shaykh Muḥammad Bāqir had himself been forced into exile. Dawlatábádí and two of his sons (Sayyid Yaḥyá and Sayyid 'Alí Muḥammad) visited Azal in Cyprus in 1886–7, when he was appointed Azal's successor. On his return to Isfahan, however, he was put under such pressure because he was known as a Bábí that he twice recanted his Bábí beliefs and cursed the Báb and Azal from the pulpit, but this did not avail him and shortly afterwards he left Isfahan for

Tehran in 1888 (Bámdád, 1973, vol. 6, pp. 288–91; Walcher 2008, pp. 118–21; Momen 2021, pp. 45–46).

Hájí Mírzá Hádí Dawlatábádí's son, Sayyid Yahyá Dawlatábádí (1863–1939) had accompanied his father to study at Najaf and Karbala in 1873–77, to Mashhad and Tehran in 1880–82 and to Cyprus in 1886–7. He was appointed Azal's successor when his father died in 1908 (Momen 2021, pp. 46–7).

Sayyid Yahyá Dawlatábádí credits a circle of poets with being the first to bring some new thinking to the barren intellectual landscape of Isfahan. However, he considers that it was the arrival in Isfahan in 1299/1882 of Shaykh Muḥammad Manshádí Yazdí (said to have been a Bábí¹²) that really heated up the discussions about reform. Yazdí was a controversial figure and there was soon such opposition to him that he left after only a brief stay in Isfahan.¹³

A short time later in 1883, a young Azalí moved to Isfahan, having been driven out of his hometown by the governor 'Abdu'l-Ḥamíd Mírzá Násiru'd-Dawlih. He was called Mírzá Áqá Khán Kirmání (Mírzá 'Abdu'l-Ḥusayn Bardsírí, c.1853–1896) and he was joined a year later by his friend, another Azalí from Kirman, Shaykh Aḥmad Rúhí (c.1856–1896). These two, together with Sayyid Yahyá Dawlatábádí and perhaps a few others, then appear to have made up a circle of reformers who met and discussed social and political matters. Unfortunately, the sources are not clear about what specifically was discussed in that circle beyond a vague statement in a biography of Mírzá Áqá Khán that "certain innovative and elevated ideas found their way [into that circle] (Adamiyyat 1967, p. 5)."

However, the animosity of Násiru'd-Dawlih, the governor of Kirman, followed Mírzá Áqá Khán to Isfahan and a letter from Násiru'd-Dawlih caused him to be dismissed from a post that he had with Zillu's-Sultán. Fearing worse to come, Mírzá Áqá Khán Kirmání left Isfahan with Shaykh Aḥmad Rúhí in mid-1885 (Dawlatábádí 1982, vol. 1, p. 67). In May 1886, Sayyid Yahyá Dawlatábádí left with his father and one brother ostensibly to go on pilgrimage to Mecca but in reality to visit Azal in Cyprus. He then remained studying in Karbala and Najaf for a time before performing another pilgrimage to Mecca, visiting Egypt on the way and only eventually returning to Isfahan on 8 September 1888 (Dawlatábádí 1982, vol. 1, pp. 69–86). It is uncertain when he finally left Isfahan for Tehran. His memoirs seem to indicate that this was in 1889 (Dawlatábádí 1982, vol. 1, p. 89) but he may then have returned to Isfahan for a time since other sources indicate he finally left in 1891 (Bámdád 1968, vol. 4, p. 437).

Thus, the small group of reformers in Isfahan was dispersed. It had not lasted long and had had a minimal impact on the town. Its main importance was that it was the first stirrings of a reform movement in Isfahan and the individuals involved would go on to play a much more important role in the reform movement elsewhere.

3. The Second Phase of the Reform Movement, 1886–1903¹⁴

Before going on to consider the next circle of reformers that emerged in the period 1886–1903, it is necessary to briefly mention a number of events in Isfahan during this period, if only because they form a backdrop to the rest of this section. The first was that in the early 1880s, Zillu's-Sultán was trying to form an alliance with the Bahá'ís in order to advance his plans for seizing the throne and sent Hájí Sayyáh Maḥallátí to 'Akká in 1885 to negotiate this. But Bahá'u'lláh refused to become involved in his plotting and after this Zillu's-Sultán turned against the Bahá'ís. The second was Zillu's-Sultán's loss of most of his governorships in 1888. By 1888, Zillu's-Sultán had cajoled and bribed his father to hand over to him governorships of most of the southern half of Iran. He was planning to supplant his brother as heir to the throne. Násiru'd-Dín Sháh was made aware of his plans and suddenly moved against him in February 1888, stripping him of all of his governor-

ships except Isfahan and Yazd and drastically reducing the size of the army he had built up. Of course, Zillu's-Sultán's loss of power led to a corresponding increase in power of Áqá Najafí in the city. The third event was the episode of protests against the Tobacco Regie in 1891–2. In an effort to fund his extravagant trips to Europe, Náşiru'd-Dín Sháh gave over a concession of all rights to grow, process, sell, and export tobacco to a British subject Major G.F. Talbot in exchange for an annual payment and a percentage of the profits. The ensuing public outrage, demonstrations and the pressure from leading clerics forced the cancellation of the concession. This episode has been seen as a major stepping stone on the road to the Constitutional Revolution, involving an emergence of reformist ideas and a politicization of the masses (Keddie 1966; Afary 1996, pp. 29–33). In many places, however, and in Isfahan in particular, the protests were, as Walcher (2008, p. 142) has pointed out, “engendered more by commercial and economic pursuits rather than by goals of profound political and social change, or the improvement of the *ray'at's* [peasant's] life.” It concerned the interests of the city's land-owning, mercantile and clerical elite. The circle of reformers about whom the rest of this section of the paper is concerned were largely uninvolved and unaffected by the episode.

Following the departure of the first group of reformers, another group soon started. Maliku'l-Mutakallimín, upon his return from India in 1886, began a small circle of young reform-minded individuals. Majdu'l-Islám Kirmání calls this group the Progress Society (Anjuman-i Taraqqí), claims to have founded the group and names a few members. Sayyid Muḥammad 'Alí Jamálzádiḥ and Mahdí Malikzádiḥ, the sons of two of the members of this group, give the names of reform-minded associates of their fathers but do not give a name to the group. From these various names, it is possible to put together a list of 10–15 members of the group with varying degrees of involvement.¹⁵ The group met on Wednesdays, read the Persian-language newspapers (such as *Hablu'l-Matín*) that had started to be published outside Iran, criticized the conservative political and clerical elite in Isfahan and discussed local and national political and social reform (Jamálzádiḥ 2010, pp. 101–2; Majdu'l-Islám Kirmání 1968, pp. 310–11). But its activities were not just confined to discussion. They launched various lines of social action.

One line of social action was to support local traditional crafts. Isfahan was the most important centre in Iran for traditional crafts. These had been severely affected first by the unsettled state of affairs in the country during the eighteenth century and then increasingly by the arrival in Iran of cheaper European manufactured goods. The reformers decided to set up a company, the Islamic Company (Shirkat-i Islámiyyih), to counter this by reviving traditional crafts. They gathered a group of prominent merchants and won the support of the clerics. The company was established at a meeting on 22 July 1900 and capital of 900,000 *túmáns* was raised. The reformers then went to great lengths to publicize and support the company, even travelling to other towns. This company is said to have been the first in Iran to be owned by shareholders. The company continued for many years but it became increasingly under the control of the clerics and the merchants rather than a venture of the reformers.¹⁶

A second line of social action by the members of the group of reformers was to address the lack of modern educational facilities in the country by establishment of a modern school. But their clerical opponents managed to raise a mob which wrecked the school facilities in February 1895, accusing it of being a house of irreligion and corruption.¹⁷ Malikzádiḥ writes that the assassination of Náşiru'd-Dín Sháh in 1896 changed the situation in Iran and in Isfahan. Nationally, the replacement of the unbendingly reactionary old shah by the more moderate and kindly Muẓaffaru'd-Dín Sháh meant that the environment for reform became more favourable. Locally in Isfahan, Zillu's-Sultán's position became weakened (because of his previous rivalry with Muẓaffaru'd-Dín Sháh) and he became sub-

servient to the clerics of Isfahan, and Áqá Najafí in particular (Malikzádih 1946, pp. 76–7; Malikzádih 2004, vol. 1, p. 158). The reformers were able to establish a school in 1897, although those most closely associated with the school Mírzá ‘Alí Khán and Áqá Muḥammad Javád Šarráf, were pursued by the clerics and the latter severely beaten (see below). An attempt to establish a hospital failed (Malikzádih 1946, pp. 81–82; Malikzádih 2004, vol. 1, p. 158).

A third line of action by the members of this circle of reformers was the publication of a book, *The Veridical Dream* (*Ruyá-yi Šádiqih*, The True Dream), which was written in 1900. The book gives an account of a dream about the Day of Resurrection and of Judgement in which the senior political and clerical figures in Isfahan, in particular both Zillu’s-Sultán and Áqá Najafí, who are both named in the book, are interrogated and their misdeeds, duplicity, and corruption are exposed. The authors of this book were Maliku’l-Mutakallimín, Sayyid Jamál Vá’iz, Fátiḥu’l-Mulk, and Mírzá Aḥmad Majdu’l-Islám Kirmání. At first, copies of the book were circulated in manuscript form, but later, the book was sent to Russia through Mírzá Asadu’lláh Khán Ná’íní, the Persian secretary of the Russian consulate, and published in St Petersburg. Copies were then smuggled back into Iran and distributed. It was also later published in India and Baku.¹⁸

It is difficult to understand at this distance in time the thinking of the authors in publishing this book. They surely must have known that, although they had concealed their names, these would eventually become known and the contents would rouse and unite both Zillu’s-Sultán and Áqá Najafí, the two most powerful men in Isfahan, against them. Did they think that the book would rouse the people of Isfahan to such an extent that they would protect the authors from retribution? In any case, knowledge of the contents of this book gradually spread throughout Isfahan and, by about 1902, its authors became known. This provoked the anger of both Zillu’s-Sultán and Áqá Najafí. It was one of the factors leading to the dissolution of the circle of reformers in Isfahan. But, as will be discussed presently, the commotion caused by the book was blended with a campaign against the Bahá’ís of Isfahan culminating in violence and deaths in 1903 and this was the direct cause of the dispersal of many of the leading reformers.

An important event for this circle of reformers was the arrival in Isfahan in August 1902 of Hájí Abu’l-Ḥasan Mírzá Shaykhu’r-Ra’ís (1848–1918), a Qájár prince who was a prominent reformer and a Bahá’í.¹⁹ Two of the prominent Bahá’ís of the town, the above-mentioned Mírzá ‘Alí Khán and Áqá Muḥammad Javád, were the most active in sponsoring him and organizing his lectures. He was an engaging speaker and large crowds were attracted to hear him preach of reform with occasional allusions to the Bahá’í Faith. The public debate about reform that preachers like Maliku’l-Mutakallimín and Sayyid Jamál Vá’iz had initiated in the 1890s had been shut down and these two had had to move their preaching from Isfahan to other towns. The discussions about reform were now only taking place in small private meetings in homes. The importance of Shaykhu’r-Ra’ís for the reform movement was that he was able to once again bring the attention of the generality of the people of Isfahan to this debate by raising these issues in large open public meetings. Áqá Najafí immediately began a campaign against him, declaring him to be a “Bábí” and threatening those who attended his lectures of being accused of being “Bábís” also. He pressured Zillu’s-Sultán to remove Shaykhu’r-Ra’ís from Isfahan. After a month of pressure, Shaykhu’r-Ra’ís was forced to leave and the Bahá’ís who had actively supported him were attacked (Mázandarání 1974, pp. 214–15; Momen 2021, pp. 36–37). This was to be a prelude to the much more important episode of the siege of the Russian consulate the next year which finally extinguished all discussion of reform in Isfahan (see below).

4. The Members of the Isfahan Circle of Reformers

Before proceeding to an account of the demise of this Isfahan circle of reformers, it will help to understand the events of the period if a closer look is taken at the members of the circle. It is important to note that the main source of information that we have about this circle is written by one of the members of this circle (Majdu'l-Islám Kirmání) and the sons of two other members (the sons of Maliku'l-Mutakallimín and Sayyid Jamál Va'iz). So when scholars have been piecing together the activities of this group, the picture that emerges represents these three as the most active and prominent members of the circle. But this may be a distortion. For example, [Malikzádih \(1946, pp. 69–70\)](#) implies that his father was the leading figure in the establishment of the school but [Jamálzádih \(2010, p. 102; 1999, p. 25\)](#) makes Mírzá 'Alí Khán to be the founder. Similarly, the glowing praise by [Malikzádih \(1946, passim; 2004, vol. 1, pp. 156–65\)](#) of his father should be seen against the somewhat more negative assessment by [Majdu'l-Islám Kirmání \(1972, pp. 68–69\)](#). [Malikzádih \(1946, p. 94\)](#) attributes authorship of *The Veridical Dream* solely to his father whereas in fact four were involved in its authorship and it is said that Majdu'l-Islám Kirmání was the main author ([Şafá'í 1984, vol. 1, p. 321](#)). But beyond these examples, it is likely that these biases in our sources have distorted the relative importance of the roles of the various members of the group. For example, there are indications that Mírzá Asadu'lláh Vazír may have been much more important and indeed the lynch-pin of the group. It appears that at least some and perhaps all of the meetings of the group were held in his house.²⁰ He was a centre of communications and assisted the other members of the group in various ways; he was the intermediary for Maliku'l-Mutakallimín's return to Isfahan in 1897 under Zillu's-Sultán's protection and later in 1903, it was with him that Maliku'l-Mutakallimín consulted after he had been expelled from Shiraz in 1903 and was wondering where to go (see below). Malikzádih states that Mírzá Asadu'lláh was always ready to expend of his wealth for the advancement of the reform movement and to use his powerful position in Isfahan to protect the reformers from their enemies, even to the extent of putting himself in mortal danger ([Malikzádih 2004, vol. 1, p. 203](#)).

When looking at the religious views of the individuals in the circle of reformers, there is an important point to bear in mind. Because Maliku'l-Mutakallimín, Sayyid Jamál Vá'iz and Majdu'l-Islám Kirmání were, after their departure from Isfahan, involved in a circle of Azalí reformers in Tehran who were important in the Constitutional Revolution, it has been assumed by most writers that they were also Azalís when in Isfahan (see, for example, [Şafá'í 1984, vol. 2, p. 340](#); [Bayat 1991, p. 61](#); [Afary 1996, p. 46](#); [Raḡaví 2014, pp. 227–30](#)). But evidence will be presented in this paper that they had no dealings with the Azalís while they were in Isfahan, although there were Azalís there, headed by Sayyid Aḡmad Dawlatábádí (Sayyid Yaḡyá's Dawlatábádí's brother) throughout this period. Moreover, a careful review of the evidence indicates that these individuals were associating with the Bahá'í community in Isfahan and were regarded by the governor, the clerics and the populace as being part of that community because of their close association with members of that community. We cannot know of course what was going on in the minds of the above three individuals, whether they were converts to the Bahá'í Faith for religious reasons or whether they joined in with the Bahá'í community because that was the leading platform for the discourse on reform in Isfahan at this time. There are no initiation rites and there was no formal membership of the Bahá'í community at this time and so all that can be done is to present the evidence of their actions: that they were closely involved with the Bahá'í community in Isfahan. It is possible to speculate that when these three then moved on to Tehran, they found themselves at odds with the Bahá'í community there. The Bahá'ís had been advised by the Bahá'í leader 'Abdu'l-Bahá to avoid confrontational politics, subversion, and violence and to concentrate instead on personal transformation and social

ethics as the best path towards reform. There had been little or no overt confrontational political activity in Isfahan because of the powerful opposition. And so, the Baha'is were able to engage in this discourse with the reformers as a way of continuing the discourse on reform stated by Bahá'u'lláh and 'Abdu'l-Bahá. But the leadership of the reform movement in Tehran, which was largely vested in Azalí Bábís, was increasingly taking the movement down the road of confrontation and civil unrest. When these three individuals arrived in Tehran, they found their activism was more aligned with the Azalís there than with the Bahá'í community and so they gravitated towards the Azalís. Of course, just as with their being part of the Bahá'í community in Isfahan, we cannot tell whether they were part of the Azalí community in Tehran out of religious conviction or whether it was because that was where a discourse on reform that suited them was occurring. While they were in Isfahan, however, there are no Azalís among the list of their friends there produced by one of them and the sons of the two others (regarding these lists see below). And conversely the Azalí leader Dawlatábádí (1982, vol. 1, p. 86), who lived in Isfahan for part of this period appears to have had no knowledge of their activity in Isfahan and indeed asserts there was no sign of any reform activity in Isfahan at this time. It can safely, therefore, be asserted that they were not Azalís while they were in Isfahan.

Furthermore, some individuals who were associated with the above three in Isfahan such as Mírzá Asadu'lláh Khán Ná'íní have also been called Azalís on no evidence other than their association with the above three (Afary 1996, p. 47). However, if these three were not Azalís in Isfahan, then there are no grounds for supposing that Ná'íní was either; and the evidence presented below indicates he was probably a Bahá'í.

The lists of names given in three sources (Majdu'l-Islám Kirmání 1968, pp. 311–12; Malikzádih 1946, pp. 64–65; and Jamálzádih 1999, pp. 64–65; see also Yaghmá'í 1978, p. 2) for the members of the Isfahan circle of reformers overlap to some extent. I have taken the longest list, that given by Malikzádih (1946, pp. 64–65) for his father's associates in Isfahan, and subtracted from it those who were his father's teachers rather than being in the circle of reformers, leaving nine names. I have added to this list Majdu'l-Islám Kirmání and three others who are absent from Malikzádih's list but on the lists of the other two writers (Jamálzádih and Majdu'l-Islám). I have also added Mírzá Asadu'lláh Khán Ná'íní, because he clearly was involved in the activities of the circle of reformers (being the person who secretly managed to forward a copy of *The Veridical Dream* to Russia for publication) and he is probably the person recorded as the member of the group of reformers whose name Jamálzádih says he has forgotten and whose occupation he probably misremembers as being secretary of the British consulate in Isfahan, whereas Ná'íní was in fact the secretary of the Russian consulate (Jamálzádih 2010, p. 102). There follows a review of the information about each of these fifteen individuals (more information is available about some, who are better known and have books written about them, than about others). The names of each are italicized below at the start of the section about them:

Maliku'l-Mutakallimín (Ḥájí Mírzá Naṣrulláh Bihishtí; b. 1861, Isfahan–d. 1908, Tehran) was a gifted orator drawing large audiences wherever he preached. He went on a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1882 at the age of 21 and was invited by some of his fellow-pilgrims to go to Bombay. He spent two years there, affording him an opportunity to observe the effects that the rule of law and modern education had upon society. On his way back from India, he also spent three months in Bushihr (December 1885–February 1886) with the prominent reformer Sayyid Jamálu'd-Dín Asadábádí ("Afghání"), before arriving back in Isfahan. Here, he began to talk about modern ideas and about the reform of Iranian politics and society and helped form, as mentioned above, the group of reformers whom Majdu'l-Islám Kirmání calls the Progress Society. At first Mírzá Háshim, the Imám-Jum'ih of Isfahan, supported him and asked him to preach at the Jámi' Mosque, which he filled to capacity. The

other clerics in Isfahan did not like his radical political views and his criticisms of the clerics but the Imám-Jum‘ih protected him. He was, however, the public face of those who tried to establish a school in Isfahan in 1895 and in the ensuing uproar, he was forced to leave Isfahan. He went to Tabriz, where the environment was much friendlier towards the reformers under its governor Muẓaffaru‘d-Dín Mírzá. After a while, Maliku‘l-Mutakallimín travelled to Tehran, where he met with the reformist followers of Sayyid Jamálu‘d-Dín Asadábádí. Zillu‘-s-Sultán invited Maliku‘l-Mutakallimín to return to Isfahan in about 1896 but then turned against him in 1900, forcing him to go to Tehran for a time before coming back to Isfahan (Malikzádih 1946, pp. 74, 110, 130). In early 1903, he was invited to Shiraz where he gave many sermons. But again he stirred up opposition and in June 1903, he was expelled from Shiraz (see below).²¹ After a few months at his estate at Mahdiyabad, a village near Isfahan, he proceeded directly to Tehran, where he settled and never returned to Isfahan.²²

With regard to his religious views and activities, Maliku‘l-Mutakallimín is reported to have first encountered the new religion on his return to Isfahan from India in 1886 (Ṣafá‘í 1984, vol. 2, p. 340). There was thus an overlap of at least three years (possibly six years—see above) when both he and the leading Azalí of the area, Sayyid Yaḥyá Dawlatábádí, were in Isfahan together. And yet there is no mention of Maliku‘l-Mutakallimín in Dawlatábádí’s memoirs for this period and indeed the latter states that there was no trace of any reform activity in Isfahan at this time (Dawlatábádí 1982, vol. 1, p. 86). Nor is there mention of Sayyid Yaḥyá Dawlatábádí in the list of Maliku‘l-Mutakallimín’s associates in Isfahan given by his son, Malikzádih (1946, pp. 64–65), in his biography of his father. Nor is there any mention by Malikzádih of Sayyid Yaḥyá’s brother Mírzá Aḥmad, who remained in the Isfahan area as the Azalí leader after his brother’s departure and for the whole time until Maliku‘l-Mutakallimín left Isfahan in 1903. On the other hand, many on the list of Maliku‘l-Mutakallimín’s associates in Isfahan were Bahá’ís. So, the evidence suggests that it was the Bahá’ís that Maliku‘l-Mutakallimín was closely associated with. Furthermore, it was reported by the British consular agent in Shiraz (Vaḳáyi‘ 707–8), that during the five months that he spent in Shiraz in 1903, Maliku‘l-Mutakallimín was openly calling himself a “Bábí.” and had gathered around himself a group of “Bábís”. Since there were no Azalís in Shiraz at this time, this could only have been a group of Majdu‘l-Islám Kirmání (1972, p. 214) reports that while Maliku‘l-Mutakallimín was in Shiraz, he had allowed his house in Isfahan to be used by the Bahá’ís to house the prominent Bahá’í propagandist and administrator Mírzá Ḥasan Adíb who was visiting Isfahan.²³ Maliku‘l-Mutakallimín was thus knowingly putting his home and family in danger. Meanwhile, there was a general upheaval against the Bahá’ís in Shiraz in June 1903. The governor, Mírzá Aḥmad Khán Qájár ‘Alá‘u‘d-Dawlih, met with prominent Bahá’ís and decided that the best way of pacifying the town was if several of the leading Bahá’ís left town. Among those who left was Maliku‘l-Mutakallimín, who travelled to his estate at Mahdiyábád, a village near Isfahan (Vaḳáyi‘ 707–8; Momen 2021, vol. 2, p. 278; Malikzádih 2004, vol. 1, p. 161). During his time in Shiraz and Mahdiyábád, the only contact with Isfahan that his son records in the biography of his father is the entire text of a long letter to Mírzá Asadu‘lláh Khán Vazír which is indicative of a close friendship between the two (Malikzádih 1946, pp. 136–41). The significance of this is that Mírzá Asadu‘lláh was also the most prominent Bahá’í of Isfahan. Mírzá Asadu‘lláh had written to Maliku‘l-Mutakallimín, asking him to come to Isfahan to assist in limiting the tyranny of Zillu‘-s-Sultán but he decided that there was no prospect of an improvement in the situation in Isfahan and so he decided to go to Tehran instead. This letter provides evidence that Maliku‘l-Mutakallimín was not at this time an Azalí, since Mírzá Asadu‘lláh Khán Vazír, as a convinced Bahá’í would not be forming a close friendship with an Azalí or inviting him to come to Isfahan. There are thus several lines of evidence to demonstrate that Maliku‘l-Mutakallimín was closely associated with

the Bahá'ís right up to his departure to Tehran in 1903. He only became involved with Azalís when he moved to Tehran, where he played a prominent role in the Constitutional Revolution. Interestingly, the Iranian scholar Bámdád (1968, vol. 4, p. 346n) acknowledges in his biography of Maliku'l-Mutakallimín that he was at first a Bahá'í (i.e., in Isfahan) and only later an Azalí (i.e., in Tehran); and the Iranian Bahá'í scholar Máẓandarání (1974, p. 170) makes a similar statement.

Sayyid Jamál Vá'iz (Sayyid Jamálu'd-Dín Hamadání or Isfahání, b. about 1862, Hamadán-d. 1908, Tehran) was born into a prominent clerical family, the Šadr family of the Jabil 'Ámil in Lebanon. When his father died, his mother took him to Tehran. In 1882, he went to Isfahan for further education and settled there. He became a very skilful and eloquent preacher in Isfahan and was given a pension by the shah and the title Šadru'l-Vá'izín by Zillu's-Sultán. The evidence for his association with the Bahá'ís is weaker than for other members of this group and rests mainly on his close association with Maliku'l-Mutakallimín (Malikzádih 1946, p. 64, calls them “one soul in two bodies”) and the fact that it appears that some or all of the meetings of this reform group were held at the home of a Bahá'í, Mírzá Asadu'lláh Vazír. As with Maliku'l-Mutakallimín, there is no mention in the memoirs of Sayyid Jamál's son, Jamálzádih, of his father having any dealings with the leading Azalís of the area. His progressive ideas incurred the enmity of Zillu's-Sultán and Áqá Najafí and so they prevented him from preaching in Isfahan by publicly calling him a “Bábí.” As a consequence, he would travel to other towns, especially Tabriz for about three months each year, the months of Muḥarram, Šafar, and Ramaḍan when there was the greatest demand for preachers, and this would earn him enough money to spend the rest of the year in Isfahan. He appears to have taken a special interest in the Širkat-i Islámiyyih; he travelled to Shiraz in 1900 to promote it and wrote a book, *Libásu't-Taḡvâ* (The Dress of Piety) about the need to wear traditional Iranian cloth rather than foreign-manufactured cloth. When his contribution to the book *The Veridical Dream* became known, this aroused the wrath of Zillu's-Sultán and Áqá Najafí. He was in Tehran on his way back to Isfahan from Tabriz when the outbreak against the Bahá'ís occurred in 1903. Áqá Najafí had proclaimed him to be a “Bábí” and worthy of death. His wife found out that Zillu's-Sultán had spoken in a circle of his courtiers of his determination to kill Sayyid Jamál on his return. She sent word to him not to come and so he settled in Tehran and sent for his family to join him. In Tehran, he played a prominent role in the Constitutional Revolution.²⁴

Shaykh Aḥmad Majdu'l-Islám Kirmání (b. 1871, Kirman-d. 1923, Kirman) was born into a clerical family and received a clerical education before coming to Isfahan in 1890 to continue his studies, obtaining a certificate of *ijtihád* after three years. He began to write articles for Persian-language reform newspapers that were being published abroad at this time, in particular the *Ḥablu'l-Matín*. He is said to have been the main author of *The Veridical Dream* (Šafá'í 1984, vol. 1, p. 321) and shortly after its authorship became known he was arrested by Mírzá Háshim, the Imám-Jum'ih, and condemned to death on the accusation of being the author of this book and a “Bábí.” He was able to escape by payment of a fine. But Áqá Núrulláh, the brother of Áqá Najafí, was also attacking him and so he was forced to leave Isfahan in disguise, proceeding to Tehran in about 1902. In Tehran, he became involved in reformist circles and, because of this, he was exiled to Kalát for a time. He started and ran several newspapers. In 1909, he returned to Isfahan for a few months.²⁵

With Kirman being the hometown of Azalí reformers such as Mírzá Áqá Khán Kirmání and Shaykh Aḥmad Rúhí, it is tempting to group Majdu'l-Islám Kirmání with them as an Azalí, but a closer look at his biography shows that he did not study under the Azalí leader in Kirman, Shaykh Ja'far Kirmání, as these two other Azalí reformers did, but under entirely different teachers (Khalíl-púr, in *Majdu'l-Islám Kirmání* 1972, p. tá). The activities of Majdu'l-Islám while he was in Isfahan do not give a clear indication of his religious leanings except that he would have attended the meetings held at the home of Mírzá Asadu'lláh Vazír and it may be because of this that he was accused of being a “Bábí” by Mírzá Háshim,

the Imám Jum‘ih (Khalílpúr in [Majdu‘l-Islám Kirmání 1972](#), p. yih). However, if one reads his history of the Constitutional Revolution, it reveals a detailed knowledge of the comings and goings of the Baha‘i community of Isfahan up to 1903 extending to about 20 pages of the book ([Majdu‘l-Islám Kirmání 1972](#), pp. 207–26). Given that the Bahá‘í community was an underground movement that kept its activities private to avoid persecution, such knowledge could only have come from attending meetings and active participation in the community up to about 1902 when he left Isfahan. Such knowledge could not have been gained by an outside observer. He also gives far greater details of the persecutions of the Bahá‘ís in Isfahan than other historians and is the only one of them to call the community “Bahá‘í” rather than “Bábí” and to distinguish Bahá‘ís and Azalís (see for example, [Majdu‘l-Islám Kirmání 1972](#), pp. 207–26). There is no mention in his history, however, nor any awareness of Azalí activity in Isfahan during the period that he was in Isfahan. Although the following words from the Bahá‘í writer [Aláqiband Yazdí \(n.d., pp. 375–76\)](#) were recorded in about 1910 after Majdu‘l-Islám had moved to Tehran, they may be referring to the fact that he had been in the company of Bahá‘ís in Isfahan and later of Azalís when he had moved to Tehran: “... when he was among the Bahá‘ís he went along with them and when with the Azalís he was an Azalí.” These points are not without significance and taken together are highly suggestive of Majdu‘l-Islám being a Bahá‘í or closely associated with the Bahá‘í community while in Isfahan.

Fátiḥu‘l-Mulk (Mírzá Aḥmad Khán, d. 1338/1919) was one of the leading progressive thinkers in Isfahan. He had attended the Dáru‘l-Funún in Tehran and been appointed the head of the military forces in Isfahan. Most scholars ([Wá‘ez et al. 2017](#); [Bámdád 1968](#), vol. 1, p. 256; [Bayat 1991](#), p. 63; [Afary 1996](#), p. 45) seem to miss that he was also one of the authors of *The Veridical Dream*, despite the fact that [Malikzádih \(1946, p. 64\)](#) states this clearly (also in [Yaghma‘í 1978](#), pp. 12, 304). It appears that by 1903, he was working as the Iranian government’s Foreign Office agent in Isfahan ([Sadeghian 2016](#), p. 109). Because treaty stipulations exempted most Europeans in Iran from being subject to most Iranian laws, the Iranian Foreign Office appointed agents in each major town to deal with Europeans consular officials in relation to cases involving Europeans. It is not known precisely when Fátiḥu‘l-Mulk became a Bahá‘í. first firm date that we have for his Bahá‘í identity is 1903, when he consulted with several other leading Bahá‘ís (in the garden of Mírzá Asadu‘lláh Vazír) regarding the dangerous situation of the Bahá‘ís²⁶, a consultation that resulted in the Bahá‘ís taking sanctuary in the Russian consulate (see below). He was sufficiently well known as a Bahá‘í for the acting British consul in Isfahan, Dr. Minas Aganoor, to identify him as such in June 1903 ([Momen 1981](#), p. 381). Interestingly, it then fell to Fátiḥu‘l-Mulk as the Foreign Office agent to negotiate about the Bahá‘ís besieged in the Russian consulate with the Russian acting consul Baronovski on behalf of Zillu‘l-Sultán ([Sadeghian 2016](#), pp. 109, 111, 120, 122, 124). We have further firm evidence for his Bahá‘í identity from July 1906 when he, alongside Mírzá Asadu‘lláh Vazír, hosted two Western Bahá‘ís, Laura Barney and Hippolyte Dreyfus, during their visit to Isfahan, a high-profile visit that would have clearly identified him as a Bahá‘í to the whole population of Isfahan ([Mázandarání 1975](#), p. 1194). In later years, however, he probably distanced himself from the Bahá‘í community as he became one of the leaders of the resistance to Muḥammad ‘Alí Sháh’s coup, was deputy governor of Isfahan for a time and was elected the parliamentary representative of Isfahan in 1909 ([Rajá‘í 2006](#), pp. 426, 486–87).

Mírzá Asadu‘lláh Vazír Shahshahání (1274/1848–1336/1917) was born into a prominent family of Isfahan descended from Fath-‘Alí Khán I‘timádu‘d-Dawlih, a prime minister from the Safavid era. Mírzá Asadu‘lláh joined the tax office of Isfahan in about 1878 under Mírzá Ḥabíbulláh Anṣarí Mushíru‘l-Mulk. When the latter was dismissed in 1890, Mírzá Asadu‘lláh was appointed in his place as Vazír with responsibility for government finances

in the province of Isfahan. There can be little doubt of his Bahá'í identity. He had become a Bahá'í in 1874 through a prominent Bahá'í propagandist Mírzá Asadu'lláh Isfahání, whose sister he married and who belonged like Mírzá Asadu'lláh Vazír to one of Isfahan's leading families of government officials. The following year Mírzá Asadu'lláh Vazír travelled to 'Akka in Syria to visit Bahá'u'lláh. He was well-known in Isfahan as a Bahá'í and held regular Bahá'í meetings in his house as well as accommodating travelling Bahá'í leaders (Mázandarání 1974, pp. 125–26). It was probably because of his position in the city that he was able to withstand the onslaught against Bahá'ís and reformers that occurred in 1903 and remain in Isfahan. At the time of the Constitutional Revolution, there was pressure to dismiss him, but governors appointed by the new national government realized they could not do without him. During this period, however, he suffered much personal loss as a result of the government failing to reimburse him for salaries that he had paid from his own pocket. Eventually, when Morgan Schuster was recruited to oversee the finances of the country in 1911, a Mr. Haycock was sent to replace him. He was, however, appointed to a provincial commission to deal with the famine in 1914, which appears to have had some success. He remained a Bahá'í until his death and his family were also Bahá'ís (Mázandarání 1974, pp. 126–34; Rajá'í 2006, pp. 208, 307–8).

Mírzá 'Alí Khán²⁷ was the son of Mírzá 'Abdu'l-Hadí Mustawfí and a wealthy notable of the town who had studied at the Dáru'l-Funún in Tehran. Of the group of reformers, he was the one who was most concerned with the setting up of a school. Mírzá 'Alí Khán took on the role of head of the school and obtained the assistance of another Bahá'í, Áqá Muḥammad Javád Šarráf, who supported the school and acted as a teacher there. It is not known when these two became Bahá'ís, but Bahá'í sources record that it was before the arrival of Shaykhu'r-Ra'ís in Isfahan in 1902 (Mázandarání 1974, p. 215). They were among the most enthusiastic of Shaykhu'r-Ra'ís's followers, hosted him, and arranged and sponsored his meetings. Because of this, they became a focus of attention for Áqá Najafí. He ordered his followers to put pressure on these two men and put out a rumour that Áqá Muḥammad Javád had been seen drinking wine. Then when a year later a prominent Bahá'í Hájí Muḥammad Šarráf died, Áqá Najafí learned that Mírzá 'Alí Khán and Áqá Muḥammad Javád were at the funeral, so he sent his men to arrest them. They succeeded in arresting Áqá Muḥammad Javád and they dragged him to the Shah Mosque. At the mosque, Áqá Najafí ordered him to be whipped for the supposed crime of drinking wine the previous year, although as the British consul reported "the real cause of his arrest and punishment" was the fact that he was a "Babi."²⁸ Mírzá 'Alí Khán was among the Bahá'ís who took sanctuary in the Russian consulate (Sadeghian 2016, p. 127; Nicolas 1936, pp. 23–25, trans. in Momen 1981, pp. 382–83).

Muḥammad Ḥusayn Mírzá Mu'ayyadu'l-Dawlih (1855–1920, later Mu'ayyadu's-Saltānih) was from a princely Qajár family who lived in Hamadán. He was head of the government telegraph department in Isfahan and is described as erudite and a powerful speaker, very much opposed to corrupt clerics and officials (Malikzādih 1946, p. 64). His great-aunt and later his father had become Bahá'ís and he too is recorded in the Bahá'í histories as being an active member of the Bahá'í community. He was one of those present at a meeting of the Bahá'ís of Isfahan in 1903 when the decision was made to seek sanctuary in the Russian consulate. He later visited 'Abdu'l-Bahá in Haifa (Mázandarání 1974, pp. 215, 426–27).

Mírzá Maḥmúd Šadr (Šadru'l-'Ulamá, Šadru'l-Aḥrār, d. 1946) is described by Malikzādih (1946, p. 64) as an orator and an enlightened thinker. The Bahá'í scholar Mázandarání (1972, vol. 4, pp. 446–47; 1974, p. 169) states that he was a Bahá'í who was forced to flee the wrath of Áqá Najafí and so left Isfahan for the Firaydan district.

Shaykhu'l-'Irāqayn (Shaykh Muḥammad Ḥasan 'Arab), was a leading cleric of Isfahan and is described by Malikzādih as a powerful figure who was able to assist the reformers.

He was sufficiently well-known as a “Bábí” for the acting British consul in Isfahan, Dr Minas Aganoor, to identify him as such in 1903 (FO 248 788 in [Momen 1981](#), p. 381). Such an identification is significant because the accusation of being a “Bábí” was freely thrown by reactionary individuals against any reformer in order to discredit them, but the British consul would have no reason to make such a fictitious allegation. The Bahá’í scholar [Mázandarání \(n.d., vol. 7, pp. 163–68\)](#) states that during the episode of the siege of the Russian consulate in 1903, he was the only one of the clerics in Isfahan to try to protect the Bahá’ís. He is the only member of this circle of reformers who had some dealings with the Azalís of Isfahan in that, during this episode of the siege of the Russian consulate, as well as protecting the Bahá’ís, Shaykhu’l-‘Iráqayn prevented an attack on Mírzá Aḥmad Dawlatábádí, the Azalí leader in the Isfahan area ([Walcher 2008](#), p. 280). Shaykhu’l-‘Iráqayn remained in Isfahan and at the time of the Constitutional Revolution, when the senior clerics of Tehran had taken sanctuary in Qum in the summer of 1906, was sent by the clerics of Isfahan to Qum with assurances of their support ([Rajá’i 2006](#), pp. 101–2).

Mírzá Asadu’lláh Khán Ná’íní was the Persian secretary of the Russian consulate in Isfahan. Most European consulates had a native Persian-speaking individual in this post who could translate oral and written communications with Iranians for them. Such individuals would be in a strong position as they would be under the protection of a European power. Ná’íní is not on the list by Malikzádih as one of the reformers but probably is on Jamálzádih’s list (as explained above). There is evidence that Ná’íní was both a reformer (in that he assisted in getting a manuscript of *The Veridical Dream* out of Isfahan and to St Petersburg) and a Bahá’í (in that he assisted the Bahá’ís in gaining sanctuary in the Russian consulate, see below). There is further evidence of Ná’íní being a Bahá’í in that Zillu’s-Sultán states that his identity as such is proven ([Sadeghian 2016](#), p. 119), while a cleric identified as Áqá Sayyid Muḥammad Háshim (presumably the senior cleric Sayyid Háshim, Imám-Jum’ih of Isfahan) wrote to the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mushíru’d-Dawlih, saying that Ná’íní was a “misled Bábí” ([Sadeghian 2016](#), p. 118). But the most important evidence is that Sadeghian has found a report from Bombay in the archives of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs stating that Ná’íní was the true author of the book *Rajmu’s-Shaytán* that was published in Bombay (in about 1894). Ná’íní, using the pseudonym Ḥájí Shaykh ‘Abdu’l-Raḥím, wrote this book ostensibly as a refutation of a book *Kitáb-i Ímán* (which is otherwise unknown). The whole text of *Kitáb-i Ímán* is quoted and is a presentation of Bahá’í proofs. Edward G. Browne’s assessment of the book is that the author of this work wrote the *Kitáb-i Ímán* and then clothed it with a “feeble” refutation “merely to ensure its safe and open circulation among Musulmáns” but that he was “inclined to believe that the book really forms part of the Bábí propaganda” ([Browne 1918](#), pp. 192–93). This is a very interesting finding since it is evidence that Ná’íní was a Bahá’í from before 1894. Finally, as stated previously, there is no evidence that Ná’íní was an Azalí. The claims that he was appears to be based on his association with Maliku’l-Mutakallimín and Sayyid Jamál Vá’iz, for whom evidence is presented above that they were not Azalís but engaged with the Bahá’í community at this period in their lives.

There are five other names on the list of reformers in Isfahan in this period. Sayyid ‘Abdu’l-Vaḥháb Imámí is on the list of members of the Progress Society given by [Jamálzádih \(2010, p. 102\)](#). Ḥájí Mírzá Sayyid ‘Alí Jináb, a noted author, and Mírzá Muḥammad ‘Alí ‘Alam are named by [Majdu’l-Islám Kirmání \(1968, pp. 311 and n\)](#). Mírzá Núrud-Dín Majlisí is described by Malikzádih as an enlightened cleric, reformer, poet, and a descendant of the famous Safavid cleric Muḥammad Báqir Majlisí ([Malikzádih 1946, pp. 65, 77](#)). Shaykh Ḥasan Nizámu’l-‘Ulamá, whom Malikzádih states helped the reformers a great deal ([Malikzádih 1946, p. 65](#)), was, however, a relative of the family of Áqá Najafi and appears to have sided with them in the aftermath of the 1903 siege of the Russian consulate ([Walcher 2008, p. 285](#)).

Beyond this, there seems to be little in the sources about the reform activities of these five or their attitude towards the Bahá'í community. Majdu'l-Islám Kirmání's comment (1968, p. 312) that there were fewer than ten in the reform group also indicates that these other five were probably of little significance.²⁹

If one excludes these last five names, who do not appear to have been active members of the circle of reformers, then of the ten names about whom there is information both as regards their activities as reformers and their religious attitudes, it can be said that all of them were known as "Bábís" while they were in Isfahan. That is not surprising as there was a tendency to label anyone with progressive and reform ideas as a "Bábí" at this time. However, the evidence presented above demonstrates that at least eight of them were so closely associated with the Bahá'í community in their activities that they could be called Bahá'ís inasmuch as anyone could be at that time. With two of them, Sayyid Jamál Vá'iz and Shaykhu'l-'Iráqayn the evidence is less clear and all that can be said is that they probably had some degree of involvement with the Bahá'í community in that they were closely involved with these other Bahá'ís and were probably attending meetings at the home of a Bahá'í (Mírzá Asadu'lláh Vazír). But for the other eight, the standard accusation made by reactionary elements in the Iranian population against reformers in Isfahan, and indeed in all Iran, that they were all "Bábís" may, in this particular case, have actually been true in that they were all either Bahá'ís or closely associated with the Bahá'í community.

5. The Siege of the Russian Consulate, 1903

The episode that brought this phase of the reform movement in Isfahan to an end was one in which several hundred Bahá'ís took sanctuary in the Russian Consulate in Isfahan and were besieged there by a large crowd. Since this episode has been extensively analyzed by [Sadeghian \(2016\)](#), there is no need to give details here; a brief description will suffice based on that and other sources (mainly [Majdu'l-Islám Kirmání 1972](#), pp. 214–26; [Nicolas 1936](#), pp. 22–28; [Momen 1981](#), pp. 376–85). Also, it should be noted that what will be discussed here are just the proximate causes of these events. There were more distant causes also, such as the preceding rising against the Bahá'ís in Rasht that year ([Momen 2015](#), pp. 343–46) and the general dissatisfaction with the premiership of Amínu's-Sultán ([Keddie 1969](#)) but they are outside the focus of this article.

Following the whipping of the prominent Bahá'í Áqá Muḥammad Javád (see above) on 23 May 1903, a few of the leading Bahá'ís gathered in the garden of Mírzá Asadu'lláh Vazír and consulted about the situation. According to one source, those present at the consultation were Mírzá Ḥasan Adíb, an eminent Bahá'í from Tehran who was visiting Isfahan, Mírzá Asadu'lláh Vazír, Fátihu'l-Mulk, Mírzá Muḥammad Khán Lashkarnivís, and Mírzá Muḥammad Šádiq, the son of one of the Bahá'ís executed in 1879³⁰. They decided that they could not continue in a state of fear of Áqá Najafí's attacks and the suppression of their rights. So, they resolved to approach one of the European consulates to allow them to take sanctuary there and appeal to the shah in protest at their persecution. Mírzá Asadu'lláh Khán Ná'íní talked to the acting Russian consul Baronovski (the consul Dabizha was away) on behalf of the Bahá'ís and he agreed.

Many of the Bahá'ís of Isfahan went to the Russian consulate on 24 May. Baronovski encouraged more to come and some came from Najafábád, in all a total of about 600–700³¹. Zillu's-Sultán sent Fátihu'l-Mulk to the consulate to try to persuade the Bahá'ís to disperse but instead they presented demands regarding freedom to practice their religion. Then Áqá Najafí then presented a telegram, widely reported to have been a forgery, from the government in Tehran giving him authority to do whatever he considered right by Islamic Holy Law. He encouraged a large crowd of several thousand to besiege the Russian consulate on 28 May 1903. The crowd was threatening to invade the consulate in order to attack

the Bahá'ís. Baronovski who had been out of the consulate during that day returned to find an angry mob surrounding his consulate. Unable to enter, he hurried to Zillu's-Sultán to appeal for protection. Zillu's-Sultán sent a stern letter to Áqá Najafí and sent Fátihu'l-Mulk to bring Áqá Najafí to the consulate and order the mob to disperse. Baronovski was then able to return to the consulate. He had however lost his nerve and ordered the Bahá'ís to leave. The mob had not completely dispersed and as the Bahá'ís left, they were attacked and at least one elderly Bahá'í was killed. Disorder on the streets continued over the next few days, with many being accused of being "Bábís" (even though some were not) just so as to extort money from them.

Áqá Najafí was summoned to Tehran to account for his actions but Zillu's-Sultán managed to prevent his going, fearing the accusations that Áqá Najafí might make once there. Áqá Najafí and his brother Áqá Núrulláh did go to Tehran later that year but by that time, the episode had come to an end and, although they were kept in Tehran for several months, no formal reprimand or punishment was meted out to them and they returned in triumph.

6. The Third Phase of the Reform Movement, 1903–1906

The events of 1903, and in particular the siege of the Russian consulate brought the activities of the circle of reformers to an end. Áqá Najafí had shown that he was powerful enough within the city to cow even a European power, the feared Russians. He had outsmarted Zillu's-Sultán by pretending to acquiesce in dispersing his mob outside the consulate, while in reality many of them remained nearby and pounced on the Bahá'ís as they emerged from the consulate. He had rid himself of two leading opponents, Maliku'l-Mutakallimín and Sayyid Jamál Vá'iz, who were out of Isfahan when this episode occurred and found it impossible to return, so they moved to Tehran as described above. Majdu'l-Islám Kirmání had left Isfahan because of the pressure upon him a short while before. The school the reformers had set up was abandoned since both the headmaster Mírzá 'Alí Khán and the teacher Áqá Muḥammad Javád fled to Tehran during this episode (Jamálzádh 1999, p. 23). Áqá Najafí's "reign of terror" had succeeded in shutting down all discourse or action relating to reform.

As a consequence, while in the rest of Iran during this period, the level of discourse about reform rose in volume and tempo and the Constitutional Movement gathered steam, Isfahan became a backwater in this regard. While in the rest of Iran there was a fierce debate between nationalist reformers and reactionary royalists, there was no real debate in Isfahan. As senior clerics like Sayyid Muḥammad Ṭabátaba'í and Sayyid 'Abdulláh Bihbihání in Tehran came out in favour of reform and the Constitution and began to rally the masses to their cause, Áqá Najafí and the other leading clerics in Isfahan were silent on these issues. Significant events in the movement towards Constitutionalism such as the *bast* (sanctuary) at Sháh 'Abdu'l-'Azím in December 1905 passed almost unnoticed in Isfahan. As Walcher has stated:

While Persia was doused in swelling pre-revolutionary political turmoil, Isfahan's diarchy [Áqá Najafí and Zillu's-Sultán] played the old games, absorbed by internal power struggles and political self-preservation...

Through the expulsion of figures like Jamál al-Dín Vá'iz, Malk al-Mutakallimín and the purging of any radical, possibly anti-clerical constituencies through the vicious anti-Bábí pogroms and relentless socio-religious repression, there was hardly any viable radical opposition left. (Walcher 2008, pp. 292, 297)

Isfahan's preoccupation with its own concerns sometimes coincidentally aligned with those of the Constitutional Movement in the rest of the country, for example, the campaign

to dislodge the Belgian customs officials. But most often what went on in Isfahan was irrelevant and of no assistance to the reformers and or to the discourse about reform.

Two Western Bahá'ís, Laura Barney and Hippolyte Dreyfus, visited Isfahan in July 1906. The ostentatious reception given to these two visitors hosted by two Bahá'ís who had previously been members of the circle of reformers before 1903, Mírzá Asadu'lláh Vazír and Fátihü'l-Mulk, was obviously a way to promote the Bahá'í cause in Isfahan (Mázandarání 1975, p. 1194). Perhaps there was also a distant hope on the part of the organizers that they could resurrect the debate in Isfahan about reform.

Although the two poles of power in Isfahan were resisting any discourse on reform, there was a growing awareness among the citizens of the town about what was going on in the rest of Iran. That and the onset of a famine in Isfahan in 1906, which led to people dying of starvation while both Áqá Najafí and Zillu's-Sultán had store-houses full of grain, resulted in increasing anger and unrest in the town and threats to kill both Áqá Najafí and Zillu's-Sultán (Walcher 2008, pp. 292–93).

Eventually, however, as it became clear that the Constitutionalists were gaining the upper hand, both Áqá Najafí and Zillu's-Sultán hurried to adjust their positions. When the merchants and craftsmen of Tehran took sanctuary in the British Legation and the clerics went to Qum and took sanctuary there, the clerics of Isfahan limited themselves to sending Shaykhu'l-'Iráqayn secretly with a message of support to Qum, but they refrained from making any public statement in Isfahan itself or sending an official delegation to Qum. But when the Shah gave way and promised a Constitution, Isfahan was illuminated in celebration on 16 August 1906. Both Áqá Najafí and Zillu's-Sultán now proclaimed themselves in favour of the Constitution. Áqá Najafí made sure that the city council, which was called for by the new parliament, was full of his supporters, thus ensuring his continued domination of the city, which was only challenged by his brother Áqá Núrulláh, who became the head of the council. It appears the Constitutional Revolution brought about something of a breach between the two brothers when, after Muḥammad 'Alí Sháh's coup, Áqá Núrulláh continued his support of the Constitutionalists while Áqá Najafí inclined towards Shaykh Faḍlulláh Núrí's position of calling for a Sharí'ah-oriented Constitution (*Mashrúṭih-yi Mashrú'ih*) and support for Muḥammad 'Alí Sháh. Zillu's-Sultán tried to present himself as an enlightened autocrat and evidently hoped that by endorsing a constitutional monarchy similar to that in Britain, he could somehow leverage himself into the position of being that monarch with Britain's backing.³²

Zillu's-Sultán was removed as governor of Isfahan on 16 March 1907 but this was not as a result of the Constitutionalists removing him because he had been an autocratic governor and committed many injustices. The reason that the people of Isfahan gave for pressing for his removal was that it was thought that there would be a conflict of interest if the governor of a town was also an extensive land owner there (Rajá'í 2006, pp. 246–47). Áqá Najafí died 5 July 1914 and Zillu's-Sultán died on 3 June 1918, ironically shortly after he had been reappointed as governor of Isfahan for the first time since his overthrow in 1907 (Rajá'í 2006, pp. 95, 99). Thus ended the duopoly that had dominated Isfahan for a third of a century.

When Muḥammad 'Alí Sháh carried out his coup in 1907 and overturned the Constitution, the people of Isfahan meekly accepted the new governor that was sent by the shah. It is true that in 1909, it was Isfahan that was, alongside Tabriz, one of the two focal points that led the counter-coup that resulted in the overthrow of Muḥammad 'Alí Sháh and the restoration of the Constitution, but this was not so much a movement of Isfahan's citizens as the result of Bakhtiyári tribesmen entering Isfahan in December 1908 and then launching in June 1909 an assault on Tehran from there.

7. Conclusions

The attitude of the Bahá'í community towards political engagement was complex and appears to have evolved over time. From as early as the 1860s, the Bahá'í leadership instructed the Bahá'ís to avoid seditious activities (plotting to overthrow or disrupt the government), which they did by refusing, for example, to get involved in Zillu's-Sultán's plots to gain the throne, as mentioned above. There were also statements by the Bahá'í leadership at various times discouraging confrontational political activity (see Yazdani 2014, pp. 53–58). It seems that the majority of leading Bahá'ís did refrain from confrontational politics. However, some Bahá'í communities and some leading Bahá'ís appear to have regarded themselves free to participate in the modernization process by engaging in the discourse that was going on in most larger towns and cities. They may well have considered that participating in this discourse was not the confrontational politics discouraged by the Bahá'í leadership, especially in Isfahan where there was no overt confrontational political activity and the reformers were meeting in secrecy.

As described above, in the period 1886–1903 in Isfahan, several of the leading Bahá'ís were participating in the discourse on modernization. We cannot know what proportion of the Bahá'í community this was as we have no way of gauging the opinions and activities of the rank-and-file Bahá'ís. It is likely that the majority of Bahá'ís were completely uninvolved in this type of activity as indeed was the majority of the population of Iran at this time (Malikzádih estimates that there were only a few hundred such reformers in the whole of Iran at this time, 2004, vol. 1, p. 69). However, the activities of these leading Isfahan Bahá'ís were not exceptional. The activities of a number of the leading Baha'ís of Sári, Mázandarán, mirrored those of Isfahan (reading and discussing the reformist newspapers and building a modern school, see Momen 2008), while individual Baha'ís such as Shaykhu'r-Ra'ís (see above) and Mír Muḥammad 'Alí Mu'ínu't-Tujjār in Bárfurúsh (Mahjuri 1966, vol. 2, p. 255) were taking an active role in the Constitutional Movement. Bahá'ís of Isfahan were active in the reform movement until at least 1903 is demonstrated by their organizing the visit of their fellow Bahá'í activist Shaykhu'r-Ra'ís in 1902.

The persecution of 1903 quashed most Bahá'í activities for a time. Then in 1907, with the beginning of modern politics in Iran (the formation of political parties and the divisiveness that followed the granting of the Constitution), 'Abdu'l-Bahá asked the Bahá'ís to withdraw from the chaos and divisiveness of the political scene in Iran (Momen 2008, pp. 352–54; Gail 1991, p. 31; Afnán 1909, p. 556, trans. 2008, pp. 204–5). However, this was not a hard and fast policy at this stage in that 'Abdu'l-Bahá did not at any time sanction those who participated in political activity. Indeed, after the restoration of the Constitution in 1909, 'Abdu'l-Bahá briefly entertained the possibility of some senior Bahá'ís putting themselves forward for election to the Parliament (Yazdani 2003, p. 300). Furthermore, there were individual Bahá'ís who continued to play a political role, such as Mírzá 'Alí Muḥammad Khán Muvaqqaru'd-Dawlih, who was a minister in the Iranian national government in 1920–21 and yet maintained 'Abdu'l-Bahá's approval (Rabbani in Afnán 2008, pp. 349–52). Even during Shoghi Effendi's leadership (1921–1957), in the early years, individuals such as Sayyid Husayn Afnan were able to hold high political office (secretary to the Iraqi council of ministers) with the approval of Shoghi Effendi, who engaged him in the Bahá'í campaign in the case of the House of Bahá'u'lláh in Baghdad (Cooper-Davies 2024, pp. 602–3). It is only at some point at the end of the 1920s that Shoghi Effendi appears to have started to ask Baha'is to relinquish these political posts and refrain from all political activity and this became a hard and fast position such that, for the first time, those who declined to comply were expelled from the Baha'i community.

In this paper, three phases of the reform movement in Isfahan leading up to the Constitutional Revolution have been analyzed. The first phase is of importance precisely because it was the first stirrings of the reform movement in Isfahan at a time when there was not much else of this sort happening in Iran, except for Tehran. However, we have little or no evidence of what was being discussed in the small group of Azalís who made up this circle and it does not seem to have made any impact on the rest of Isfahan.

The third of these three phases is notable in a negative way. While the clamour for reform and for a Constitution in the rest of Iran was reaching a crescendo, the two poles of power in Isfahan, Zillu's-Sultán and Áqá Najafí, having driven out of Isfahan the leading reformers by the end of 1903, were now, in effect, acting in concert to suppress all talk or action towards reform.

It is therefore the second phase of the reform movement in Isfahan, 1886–1903, that is of greatest interest, since, compared to other two phases, there was a great deal more discussion and action on reform by a larger number of people and with evidence of an impact on the people of Isfahan. In this phase a group of some 10–15 reformists appear to have gathered together, held meetings, discussed social and political affairs and decided on a number of lines of social action. Since several of this group were skilled preachers and writers, they were able to communicate their ideas both to the people of Isfahan and beyond. In terms of social action, they initiated the establishment of a modern company, with shareholders, to encourage traditional crafts. They eventually overcame opposition and set up a modern school in Isfahan, one of the first in Iran. They also tried to rouse opposition to the established power structures in Isfahan by writing a satire directed at the two established reactionary centres of power in Isfahan, the governor, Zillu's-Sultán, and the clerical establishment, led by Áqá Najafí.

But who were the people who were members of this circle of reformers and how did they see themselves and their actions? We cannot know what was going on in their minds and so the only pathway is to look at what they said and did and wrote, as recorded in our sources, and try to reconstruct their identity from their actions. This article has produced evidence that these reformers were closely associated with the Bahá'í community during this phase of their lives. But what was the exact relationship? Our sources present very different pictures. This comes across most clearly in the designations given to the individuals discussed in the paper by the two different groups of sources. Malikzádih calls individuals such as Mírzá Maḥmúd Šadr (Šadru'l-'Ulamá), Fátihū'l-Mulk and Mírzá Asadu'lláh Vazír by such designations as *rawshanfíkrán* (enlightened thinkers) and *ázádikháh* (freedom seeker) but never calls them Bábís or Bahá'ís (see Malikzádih 2004, p. 203; Malikzádih 1946, pp. 64, 137), while Bahá'ís authors affirm the Bahá'í identity of these same individuals but do not refer to their participation in the reform movement (Mázandarání 1972, vol. 4, pp. 446–47; Ishráq-Khávarí 1966, p. 223; Ishráq-Khávarí 1980, p. 185n; Mázandarání 1974, pp. 125–34). Another example is Ḥabíbu'lláh Afnán's history of the Baha'i Faith in Shiraz which does not even mention the fact that Maliku'l-Mutakallimín was expelled from Shiraz alongside leading Bahá'ís in 1903 (Afnán 1909, pp. 433–38). Thus, the histories written by these two groups and relied upon as sources for this article are blind to each other and therefore need to be assessed in the light of this mutual blindness. The reasons for this mutual blindness require further research, but it is possible at this stage to make some tentative suggestions. There were religious tensions between the Bahá'í historians and the scholars who were writing the histories of the Constitutional Movement, who were mostly Azalí Bábís. But there may have also been practical reasons for the mutual blindness. The Constitutionalists would have been aware that identifying with the Bábí-Bahá'í “heresy” would give extra ammunition to those who opposed the Constitutional Movement. The Bahá'í historians may have wanted to protect their community from the attacks of those

who were against all reforms in the conflict-ridden politics of the post-Revolution era. Also, they were writing in a period when the Bahá'í community had completely withdrawn from all political activity and may have been projecting this backwards to an earlier period.

To make these divergent mutually-blind accounts converge on a single intelligible narrative is of course difficult but the rest of this conclusion is a somewhat speculative attempt to do this. Looking at this period from the viewpoint of early twenty-first century Western scholarship, one can differentiate conceptually between the reformers and the Bahá'ís. While both groups may have had similar social action goals (modern education, limitations on autocracy, the elimination of corruption and constraining the retrogressive influence of the Islamic clerics), yet their methods were radically different. The social reformers aimed to bring about change through political means (gaining access to power and then enacting the changes); the Bahá'ís aimed for a grass-roots transformation, starting with the values and ethics of the individual and going on to social ethics, resulting eventually in the desired social changes. But was this academic, rational distinction also in the minds of those who participated in the events described above?

Negar Mottahedeh has suggested that ideas of reform, such as democracy and the establishment of modern schools, was identified in the late Qajar imaginary not so much with the “European other” as with the “abject Bábí other” (Mottahedeh 2008, pp. 26–29). Evidence has been presented in this paper that for the population of Isfahan, including the high government officials, represented by the governor Zillu's-Sultán, and the clerics, represented by Áqá Najafí, there seems to have been no difference between the “Bábís” (as the Bahá'ís were universally known) and the reformers. A further example of this is that, as mentioned above, *The Veridical Dream* was a book written by the reformers to try to rouse the population of Isfahan. It does not contain anything about the Bábí or Bahá'í religions. And yet the mere fact that a copy of this book was seen in the possession of Majdu'l-Islám was regarded as sufficient evidence that he was both a reformer and a “Bábí” (Khalíl-púr in (Majdu'l-Islám Kirmání 1972, p. yih)). Similarly, leading up to and during the siege at the Russian consulate in 1903, the reactionary clerics were attacking the Bahá'ís and were also at the same time going after such individuals as Shaykhu'r-Ra'ís, Maliku'l-Mutakimín, Sayyid Jamál Vá'iz, Mírzá 'Alí Khan, and Áqá Muḥammad Šarráf. Were these latter individuals under fire because they were advocating reforms or because they were Bahá'ís? Certainly, the clerics were calling all of them “Bábís” and attacking them on this basis. One wonders whether there was any clear distinction in the minds of the clerics between reformers and Bahá'ís. Looking back at these events with our conceptual categories, we tend to think that accusing the reformers of being “Bábís” was merely a stratagem of the clerics and the governor as a way of attacking the reform movement by associating the reformers with the public revulsion against the heresy and antinomian characteristics associated with the word “Bábí”. But it may be that, in this case, this was not a stratagem because there was no difference in their minds between the two.

Beyond this, however, we may also wonder whether there was any difference between the reform movement and the Bahá'í religion in the minds of those identified as being reformers/Bahá'ís. Mírzá Asadu'lláh Vazír was, according to the Iranian histories, holding meetings for the reformers in his house (Jamálzádih 2010, pp. 101–2). According to Bahá'í histories (Mázandarání 1974, p. 125), he was holding Bahá'í meetings in his house. Are these two different sets of meetings? We know that Mírzá Asadu'lláh was known as a reformer (*rawshanfíkr*, enlightened thinker) by the reformers and a Bahá'í by the Bahá'ís. So, one wonders if these were in fact the same meetings being differently described by two sets of authors with different viewpoints.

Conceptually and retrospectively, we can distinguish between the reformers and the Bahá'ís in Isfahan but there are indications that to the governor, the clerics, and the people of Isfahan and perhaps even to the reformers and Bahá'ís themselves, there was no distinction.

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Notes

- ¹ Calculated from Curzon (1892, vol. 2, pp. 482–83); Issawi (1971, p. 337) gives comparable figures for 1868 and 1884–5.
- ² On these reformers, see Nashat (1982); Cole (1998b, pp. 79–109); Menashri (1992, pp. 19–90).
- ³ On Isfahan in the 19th century, see Walcher (2008).
- ⁴ For a biographical account, see his own memoirs, Zillu's-Sultán (1986); see also Walcher (2008); Bámdád (1968, vol. 4, pp. 78–100).
- ⁵ For a biographical account, see Habíbábádí (1972, vol. 3, pp. 1007–10); al-Amín (1989, vol. 7, pp. 260–61, no. 444); Walcher (2008, 43–47).
- ⁶ For a biographical account, see Habíbábádí (1972, vol. 5, pp. 1662–66); Walcher (2008, pp. 48–50) and *passim*, see index.
- ⁷ For Shaykh Muḥammad Báqir during the famine of 1871, see Mázarandarání (n.d., vol. 6, p. 140); for Aqa Najafi in 1871, see Há'irí (1977, p. 110); for Áqá Najafi during the famine of 1893, see Algar (1969, p. 220), and Bakhshash (1978, p. 287) (Malikzádih 2004, vol. 1, p. 129, probably also relates to this episode).
- ⁸ Malikzádih (2004, vol. 1, p. 129); Malikzádih does not explicitly state that the execution was on the accusation of being a Bábí but this is implied in the fact that the episode is placed in a section under the subtitle “Bábí-kushí” (Killing Bábís); this is also how Há'irí (1977, p. 110) has interpreted this.
- ⁹ For a survey of Bábí and Bahá'í history, see Smith (1987); Amanat (1989).
- ¹⁰ The fact that the reformers were discussing modern education can be inferred from the fact that they eventually established a modern school. Their concern with limiting autocracy, eliminating corruption and constraining the retrogressive influence of the Islamic clerics comes across most strongly in their publication of *The Veridical Dream* (*Ruyá-yi Šádiqih*).
- ¹¹ Regarding modern education, this is a major theme of ‘Abdu'l-Bahá's 1875 treatise (Abdu'l-Bahá 2006, p. 72, see also pp. 20, 63, 66, 70–71, 72–4, 75; translated in Abdu'l-Bahá 1990, p. 109, see also pp. 14, 91, 97–98, 105–7, 109–12, 115). Regarding constraints on autocracy, Bahá'u'lláh (2002a, p. 24); Bahá'u'lláh (2002b, p. 90) wrote to Queen Victoria in about 1870, commending the British system of democracy. In about 1873, he wrote about the removal of autocracy from Iran (Bahá'u'lláh 1995, vv. 91–3). ‘Abdu'l-Bahá recommended democracy and constraints on autocracy in his 1875 treatise (Abdu'l-Bahá 2006, pp. 25–26; Abdu'l-Bahá 1990, pp. 23–24). Bahá'u'lláh (2002a, pp. 59–61; translated in Bahá'u'lláh 2002b, pp. 209–10) addressed Sultan ‘Abdu'l-Azíz advising him against surrounding himself with corrupt ministers. In relation to the influence of the Islamic clerics, Bahá'u'lláh (1960, p. 144; translated in 1983, p. 186) decried the “limited and obscure learnings” that dominated the curriculum of the Islamic colleges and the manner in which clerics have led the people astray in every age (Bahá'u'lláh 1960, pp. 12, 23–24; translated in 1983, pp. 15–16, 29–31).
- ¹² He is said to be a Bábí by Raḍaví (2014, p. 223). Raḍaví is somewhat free in his assertions that anyone who is described as a progressive thinker (*rawshanfikr*) or aspiring to freedom (*ázádkháh*) was a Bábí (and more particularly an Azalí). However, in this case there is additional suggestive evidence; Dawlatábádí (1982, vol. 1, pp. 63–64) writes that Yazdí had been condemned for unbelief (*kufir*) and heresy (*ilhád*) in Tehran prior to his arrival in Isfahan. Such charges were often made against Bábís and Bahá'ís.
- ¹³ Dawlatábádí (1982, vol. 1, pp. 63–64). Although Adamiyyat (1967, pp. 5–6) states that Mírzá Áqá Khán Kirmání and Shaykh Aḥmad Rúhí were also in Yazdí's circle in Isfahan, Dawlatábádí's account does not mention this and seems to make it clear that Yazdí had left Isfahan before they arrived. Dawlatábádí does however state that Maliku'l-Mutakallimín and Sayyid Jamál Vá'iz attended Yazdí's lectures.
- ¹⁴ The account of this second period overlaps to some extent with the contents of Momen (2012, pp. 482–84), and Momen (2021, vol. 2, pp. 31–41), but this paper looks in greater depth at this period from the viewpoint of the reform movement.
- ¹⁵ Majdu'l-Islám Kirmání (1968, pp. 311–12) says there were no more than ten in the group and gives five names including himself. Jamálzádih (*Sar u Tah* 102) gives a list of five but says there were two or three others whose names he has forgotten and one who

- was secretary of the British consulate in Isfahan. [Malikzádih \(1946, pp. 64–65\)](#) gives a list of thirteen associates of his father but four of them appear to be teachers of philosophy under whom his father studied and are not described as reformers.
- ¹⁶ [Malikzádih \(2004, vol. 1, pp. 136–38\)](#); [Malikzádih \(1946, pp. 91–94\)](#). Varying accounts exist about the formation of this company. [Yaghmá'í \(1978, pp. 5–6\)](#) says it was started on 27 February 1899 with a capital of 150,000 *túmán*s. Some writers, such as [Walcher \(2008, pp. 200–1\)](#), give more credit to the merchants, clerics, and the governor for the formation of the company and only give the reformers a minor role in it.
- ¹⁷ [Malikzádih \(1946, pp. 69–70\)](#) states it was wrecked before it even opened. Khalílpúr in a biographical foreword about Majdu'l-Islám ([Majdu'l-Islám Kirmání 1972, pp. 5–6](#)) states that the school had been open a month or two before it was wrecked.
- ¹⁸ [Malikzádih \(1946, pp. 64, 94–8\)](#); [Malikzádih \(2004, vol. 1, p. 158\)](#); [Yaghmá'í \(1978, pp. 12–13\)](#). The text of *The Veridical Dream* is given as an appendix to [Yaghmá'í \(1978, pp. 304–37\)](#). It has been translated as *Wá'ez, The True Dream*; see also the Introduction to this book (although the biography for Mírzá Aḥmad Kirmání given there is incorrect; it relates to another Mírzá Aḥmad Kirmání, who died in 1896, before this book was even written, see [Momen \(2021, vol. 2, pp. 431–32\)](#)).
- ¹⁹ Evidence for him having been a Bahá'í includes his poetry and his visit to the Bahá'í leader, 'Abdu'l-Bahá ([Cole 1998a](#); [Cole 2002](#); [Momen 2015, vol. 1, pp. 128–31](#)).
- ²⁰ [Majdu'l-Islám Kirmání \(1968, p. 311\)](#) states the meetings were held in the home of one of the members of the group and [Jamálzádih \(2010, pp. 101–2\)](#) indicates this was the home of Mírzá Asadu'lláh Vazír. At the time that Majdu'l-Islám was writing this book, Mírzá Asadu'lláh was still living in Isfahan and Majdu'l-Islám may have been trying to protect him by not naming him.
- ²¹ Malikzádih puts this visit to Shiraz after Maliku'l-Mutakallimín's move to Tehran and his journey to Rasht and Baku ([Malikzádih 1946, pp. 125–29](#); [Malikzádih 2004, vol. 1, pp. 160–61](#)). However, Maliku'l-Mutakallimín's letters dated June–July 1904 from Anzálí (during the visit to Rasht and Baku) that Malikzádih himself quotes ([Malikzádih 1946, pp. 125–27](#)) and the dates from the reports of the British consular agent in Shiraz of Maliku'l-Mutakallimín's presence there in June 1903 ([Vaqáyi'-yi Ittáfáqiyyih 1982, pp. 707–8](#)), definitively prove that his journey to Shiraz preceded his move to Tehran later in 1903 and his subsequent journey to Rasht and Baku in 1904. There is also the fact that Malikzádih names the governor of Fárs at the time of Maliku'l-Mutakallimín's visit as being 'Alá'u'd-Dawlih, who was governor in early 1903–early 1904 (and not later), and the fact that [Majdu'l-Islám Kirmání \(1972, p. 214\)](#) writes that during Maliku'l-Mutakallimín's absence in Shiraz, his house in Isfahan was used to house Mírzá Ḥasan Adíb, whose visit to Isfahan was in May 1903.
- ²² On the life of Maliku'l-Mutakallimín, see [Malikzádih \(1946, esp. 11–109\)](#); [Malikzádih \(2004, vol. 1, pp. 156–65\)](#); [Bayat \(1991, pp. 62–66\)](#); [Afary \(1996, pp. 61–62\)](#); [Raḍaví \(2014, pp. 217–68\)](#).
- ²³ Adíb stayed in more than one house during this time in Isfahan ([Mázandarání 1974, pp. 467–68](#)).
- ²⁴ On Sayyid Jamál Vá'iz in Isfahan, see [Yaghmá'í \(1978, esp. 1–13\)](#); [Jamálzádih \(2010, pp. 97–104\)](#); [Jamálzádih \(1999, pp. 21–24, 50–53\)](#); [Malikzádih \(2004, vol. 1, pp. 165–68\)](#); [Bámdád \(1968, vol. 1, pp. 255–57\)](#); [Bayat \(1991, pp. 62–66\)](#).
- ²⁵ On the life of Majdu'l-Islám, see Khalílpúr in [Majdu'l-Islám Kirmání \(1972, p. tá-hih\)](#); [Rajā'í \(2006, pp. 487–88\)](#); [Bayat \(1991, pp. 62–63\)](#); [Afary \(1996, p. 46\)](#).
- ²⁶ Account by Ná'ib Riḍá Qulí Nikúbín, quoted in [Ishráq-Khávarí \(1966, p. 223\)](#).
- ²⁷ Most sources, including [Majdu'l-Islám Kirmání \(1972, p. 215\)](#), the British consul Dr Aganoor ([Momen 1981, p. 378](#)), [Nicolas \(1936, pp. 23–24\)](#) call him Mírzá 'Alí Khán. [Jamálzádih \(1999, p. 23\)](#) also calls the founder of the school Mírzá 'Alí Khán but then calls the founder of the school 'Alí Naqí Khán Sarhang in the same book ([Jamálzádih 1999, p. 22](#)) and Mírzá Sayyid 'Alí Naqí Khán Lashkarnivís in another book ([Jamálzádih 2010, p. 102](#)). Although these may be different people, with the similarity in the name and the fact that they are all named as the founders of a school in Isfahan at this time, I have assumed they are all the same person.
- ²⁸ [Nicolas \(1936, p. 24\)](#); [Momen \(1981, pp. 382, 377–78, 379\)](#); [Majdu'l-Islám Kirmání \(1972, pp. 215–16\)](#). As a child, [Jamálzádih \(2010, p. 100\)](#) witnessed the whipping of Áqá Muḥammad Javád, who was his teacher.
- ²⁹ There are a few other individuals, such as Sayyid Ḥabíbulláh Ashrafu'l-Vá'izín ([Malikzádih 1946, p. 81](#)), who are mentioned incidentally and may have been part of the circle of reformers but there is insufficient evidence to be sure what their views were, at what time they held these views, or how active they were.
- ³⁰ Account by Ná'ib Riḍá Qulí Nikúbín, quoted in [Ishráq-Khávarí \(1966, p. 223\)](#); see also [Nicolas \(1936, p. 24\)](#); [Momen \(1981, p. 383\)](#).
- ³¹ On the exact numbers of Bahá'ís at the Russian consulate, see the discussion in [Momen \(1981, p. 39\)](#).
- ³² [Walcher \(2008, pp. 295–301\)](#); [Dawlatábádí \(1982, vol. 2, p. 348\)](#). [Rajā'í \(2006, pp. 367, 448\)](#) seems to indicate however that Áqá Najafí and Áqá Núrulláh did go to Qum and denies that Áqá Najafí supported Núrí, although he does concede that Áqá Najafí was not vocal in his support for the Constitution after the coup.

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