Article

Who Was a Bahá’í in the Upper Echelons of Qájár Iran?

Moojan Momen

Department of History and Texts, Wilmette Institute, Evanston, IL 60201, USA; moojan@momen.org

Abstract: This paper addresses two questions: first, that of the nature of multiple religious identities in a traditional society; second, that of who can be identified as Bahá’ís in the upper echelons of Qájár Iran. The paper identifies five criteria by which individuals can be identified as having been Bahá’ís and suggests that, since none of these are usually conclusive by themselves, more than one of the criteria should be fulfilled before we label someone as a Bahá’í. The various grades of being a Bahá’í are also examined. The paper lists a number of examples of people from the Qájár royal family and from among the highest echelons of the Qájár administration who fulfill these criteria. It also looks at two individuals who have not been claimed to be Bahá’ís in the usual Iranian and Bahá’í histories, and yet, if a close study of their lives is made, considerable evidence can be accumulated that they may have been crypto-Bahá’ís. In all, this paper indicates that there may have been many Bahá’ís in the upper strata of Qájár society, that this is a factor that has not previously been sufficiently recognized and needs to be examined for the light that it may shed on other matters.

Keywords: Bahá’í; Bahai; Qajar; Iran; religious identity; crypto-believers; multiple religious identities; social elites

1. Introduction

The matter of multiple religious identities has been investigated by scholars for decades. Briefly, it can be said to occur in three distinct types. First, there are certain religious cultures where it is acceptable to practice multiple religious affiliations. A Chinese person may find no problem in marrying according to a Christian rite but being buried according to Traditional Chinese rituals. Japanese, African and Latin American cultures also appear to accept multiple religious identities readily (see for example, Hedges 2017). A related second type is the “New Age” type of pick-and-mix religiosity that may find someone practicing Buddhist meditation, dabbling in Kabbalah and participating in pagan rites (see, for example, Bellah et al. 1985). Third, there are groups of people who take on a religious identity in order to conceal another religious identity because that identity is being subjected to severe persecution. Examples of this include the Shi’i practice of taqiyya (religious dissimulation), which enabled that community to survive centuries of persecution (Momen 1985, p. 183), and Jews in Iran who, under threat of death, converted to Islam while secretly continuing to remain Jews as much as they were able (Amanat 2011, pp. 37–59; Tsadik 2007, pp. 36, 40). This paper examines this third category in relation to another religion that has been persecuted in Iran, the Bahá’í community.

The claim of the central figure in the Bahá’í religion, Bahá’u’lláh (1817–1892), which was fully developed by 1867, was to bring a new revelation from God, superseding Islam and more suited to the present time. The Bahá’í community in Qájár Iran was subjected to intense persecution (Momen 2015; Momen 2021). Any person publicly identified as a Bahá’í could expect, as a minimum, harassment from elements in the town stirred up by the local clerics. Loss of property, loss of livelihood, loss of family connection (if they were the only Bahá’í in the family) and even loss of life were also a distinct likelihood and a frequent occurrence. Not surprisingly, therefore, most Bahá’ís took steps to conceal their religious affiliation to varying extents. This concealment was described even by Europeans. The
British scholar, Edward G. Browne (1862–1896), even though he came to Iran specifically looking for Bahá’ís, was unable to find any in the first half of his journey (Browne 1926). Concealment of one’s true opinions and beliefs was, and continues to be, deeply imbedded in Iranian culture. This is largely because it is an important part of the practice of Shi‘i Islam. The practice of taqiyya (dissimulation of one’s belief if in danger because of them) was not simply an option for Iranian Shi‘is—it was obligatory according to many transmitted Traditions of the Shi‘i Imams. Although this Shi‘i practice of taqiyya was not allowed in the Bahá’í teachings, being prudent and not unnecessarily submitting oneself to danger (hikmat) was part of the instructions given out by the Bahá’í leadership. In practice, Bahá’ís would take whatever measures were needed in their daily lives to conceal their identity, although if challenged directly, they would not deny being Bahá’ís. Thus, the Bahá’í practice of hikmat differed from the Shi‘i practice of taqiyya, which allowed concealment of belief even to the point of denying being a Shi‘i. Of course, it took time for this change of culture to embed itself in the Bahá’í community (see the example of Mirzá Sa‘íd Anşârī below). Initially, this was not too much of a problem, since the general population persisted in calling them “Bábís”, followers of the Báb (1819–1850) who preceded Bahá’u’lláh. Therefore, if they were asked whether they were Bábís, they could truthfully deny this. After a decade or so (i.e., by the 1870s), the religious and civil leaders realized this, and so, in addition to asking whether a person was a Báb or not, they would add a requirement for that person to curse both Bahá’u’lláh and the Báb, which most Bahá’ís would not do. This led on to other stratagems developed by Bahá’ís, the description of which is outside the subject matter of this paper.

Questions of religious identity are complicated enough even under normal circumstances, but when it is a matter of a religion that is being persecuted, it becomes more complicated as followers of that religion try to conceal their identity to mitigate the persecution. It becomes even more complicated when one is considering a member of a persecuted religion that has penetrated all strata of society. Those in the lower levels of society can, if identified and subjected to persecution, move away to a different location where they are not known and rebuild their lives (as many Bahá’ís did; Momen 1991). However, this course is not open to those in the upper echelons of society since they would become known wherever they moved; hence, they needed to be doubly cautious and build up elaborate mechanisms of concealment. The Bahá’í leadership instructed the Bahá’ís to keep the Bahá’í identity of high-ranking individuals secret and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá would usually only communicate with such individuals through a single Bahá’í intermediary, with no-one else in the community knowing. An additional complication is that, in many parts of Iran, especially outside the large cities, the Bahá’ís were the only group advocating social reforms (such as democracy, modern education, advancement of the role of women, etc.), and so, some may have associated themselves with the Bahá’ís to advance such reforms rather than for religious reasons. There were also many Bahá’í identities, both with regard to how various individuals viewed Bahá’u’lláh and also with regard to how the claims of Bahá’u’lláh evolved over time. A detailed look at this matter would extend this paper greatly and must await a further paper.

While much of this paper concerns the attempts by these notables to conceal their Bahá’í identity, it should not be forgotten that some of these individuals were actively propagating the new religion; otherwise, it would not have spread through this layer of society (see the example of Āghá Ján Sháhansháh Khánum and her family below) and some were quite open about their belief (see the example of Vazír Hamúyun and Mu’ayyír-ull-Mamálík below).

The writing of the history of Qájjár Iran has largely ignored the Bahá’í presence. In the case of Iranian writers, this was partly in an attempt by some to erase the Bahá’í presence and partly because the information that someone was a Bahá’í may have been unknown. Western scholars have relied upon these Iranian sources and have therefore replicated this erasure of the Bahá’í community in their work (Momen 2008, p. 362 and n.). When considering the actors in Qájjár history, a person’s religious beliefs are of importance in
assessing their life and actions, and so, this paper is one preliminary attempt to inject the Bahá’í component back into Iranian history.

Some prominent Bahá’í families went to great lengths to conceal their Bahá’í identity. The Afnáns, who were relatives of the Báb and were a prominent Bahá’í merchant family in Shiraz and Yazd, for example, used to sponsor Shi‘í rituals such as rawdih-khánats (recitals of the sufferings of the Imams) and a dastih (troupe of people chest-beating and self-flagellating in a ritual procession) during the Muharram commemorations (Afnán 2008, p. 81). In general, all converts from a Muslim background remained outwardly Muslims, while those from Zoroastrian and Jewish backgrounds retained an outward Zoroastrian and Jewish social identity, respectively. Children growing up in prominent families who were Bahá’ís sometimes never heard even the name Bahá’í spoken at home in case one of the servants should hear and later make trouble for them. Those prominent people who were the only Bahá’í in their family were in an even more difficult position, often having to keep their affiliation secret from even their spouses and children. For example, Mírzá Muhammad Ridá Kirmání, a mujtahid of Yazd, had met the Báb and was a Bábí and later a Bahá’í. He kept his belief so secret that neither the other Bahá’ís nor even his own family knew. Then, on his deathbed in 1885, he revealed this to his son, Shaykh Zaynu’l-Abîdín Abrárí (1864–1936), and told him to go to Vakil ud-Dawlih and investigate the Bahá’í religion (Mázandarâńî undated, vol. 6, pp. 798–806; Sulaymáńî 1947–75, vol. 5, pp. 253–77). Similarly, the two sons of ‘Abdu’l-Rahîm Khân Kashâñî Kalântar of Tehran appear to have grown up unaware of the fact that their father was a Bahá’í. It was only through their friendship with other Bahá’ís that they came to know of the new religion and became Bahá’ís (Gail 1987, pp. 1–67). This situation (of the children not knowing the father’s affiliation with the Bahá’í community) probably held true for many of those discussed in this paper.

With this degree of secrecy and concealment, it becomes extremely difficult to discern who was a Bahá’í. It becomes necessary to try to lay down some criteria whereby someone can be considered a Bahá’í. In this paper, we will consider the question of Bahá’í identity in Qájár Iran, particularly as it relates to those in the upper echelons of society. How can we know whether a person from that period was a Bahá’í or not? Among those factors that would enable us to identify a person as possibly having been a Bahá’í, we may list the following:

1. Those identified in Bahá’í histories as a Bahá’í. This is usually a good source of identification since it usually means that the individual identified mixed with the Bahá’í community. There are, however, some whose identification by this means might be contested; for example, the leading Shi‘í cleric of the 1880s, Mírzá-yi-Shírází, has been identified in one Bahá’í source as a secret Bahá’í on the basis of one confidential interview he gave (Afnán 2008, pp. 324–50), but such an identification is open to challenge since he never openly declared himself to be a Bahá’í. The Bahá’í identity of a number of other clerics has also been challenged, for example Hajji Mullá Muḥammad Ḥamzih Sharfātmadar of Barfurush (d. 1281/1864).

2. Those identified in other sources as Bahá’ís. Other sources include Iranian Muslim, Zoroastrian, Jewish and European sources. Here again, such identifications are open to challenge since it was not uncommon for individuals to be identified as “Bábís” (i.e., Bahá’ís) as a way of discrediting them. Indeed, as Náṣîm al-Islâm (Kirmáni) asserted, “It has become the norm in Iran that, whenever it is desired to overthrow someone and remove them from the political scene, they say that he is a Bábí” (Náṣîm al-Islâm 1967, p. 400). Hence, a simple identification of a person as a “Bábí” or Bahá’í would not necessarily indicate that the person was a Bahá’í, unless the context and source are carefully examined. For example, Sayyid Jamá’l-dín Asâdábádí “al-Afghání” was often described as a “Bábí” in sources from the nineteenth century and when Náṣîr’ü’d-Dín Sháh was assassinated by one of his followers, a number of Bahá’ís were attacked and even killed on this account. In fact, Asâdábádí was associated with Azâl Bábís but was not himself a Bábí and was somewhat inimical to the Bahá’ís.
3. Having descendants who are Bahá’ís and who assert that their ancestor was a Bahá’í. Again, although this is good evidence, it is not conclusive. There are some who have Bahá’í descendants and are said to have been Bahá’ís, but were probably not; for example, Mástir Khudábakhsh (1865–1918), a leading Zoroastrian of Yazd.7

4. Supportive evidence from Bahá’í sources. Apart from direct statements that a particular person was a Bahá’í, some sources contain other supportive evidence for a person being a Bahá’í, such as the writings of the person themselves (especially their poetry, which may hint at their religious affiliation), being a member of a local Bahá’í council (local spiritual assembly) or being in correspondence with or visiting the Bahá’í leaders. However, while being a member of a local spiritual assembly is probably conclusive even in the absence of other evidence, very few individuals from the highest echelons of Qajar society would fit this criterion (perhaps only Mirzáz ‘Alí Muḥammad Khán Muvaqqjar ud-Dawlih (1865–1921), who was on the Shiraz Bahá’í assembly and later governor of Bushir (1911–1915)). Many individuals who wrote to Bahá’u’lláh and ‘Abdu’l-Bahá or even visited them were not Bahá’ís and some were even antagonistic to the Bahá’í religion.

5. Supportive evidence from other sources. Such evidence includes a close examination of a person’s writings (especially their poetry, as in the case of Shaykh ur-Ra’ís below) and accounts of how the individual treated Bahá’ís while holding official positions. But of course, good treatment of Bahá’ís may just indicate a person’s humanitarianism or there may have been other factors involved.8 Although it is not possible to prove conclusively that any such individuals were Bahá’ís, in all cases, it is necessary to ask the question: if this individual was not a crypto-Bahá’í or close sympathizer, why would he or she have risked life and wealth by associating with or protecting Bahá’ís in such a manner that laid them open to the risk of being accused of being Bahá’ís?

As can be seen from the above, none of these pieces of evidence is conclusive and one should ideally have more than one piece of evidence from more than one of these criteria before suggesting that any individual may have been a Bahá’í. The higher up the social scale one examines, the more that person might take steps to conceal their identity and so the more difficult it is to make a determination. As several Western observers noted, there were Bahá’ís in the highest echelons of the Qajar regime, including Qajar princes, highly placed officials and the immediate entourage of the Shah (see also below)9. Of course, one cannot know what was going on in the mind of a person, but one can assess their relationships and actions. Therefore, for many of these people, it is not possible to make a definitive determination of their religious beliefs and some of them may just have been close sympathizers of the religion rather than outright believers. In the rest of this paper, it is therefore understood that when an individual is designated a Bahá’í, it indicates that there are sufficient grounds to think that the person may have been a Bahá’í on account of satisfying more than one of the above five criteria, but that it is possible they may have just been a close sympathizer.

There are also examples of individuals who were not Bábís or Bahá’ís but stood to be accused of being so, either because they had initially become believers in the new religion but later withdrew from it when persecutions arose, or because their father had been a Báb or Bahá’í. Such individuals sometimes acted vigorously to forestall such suspicions, even to the extent of persecuting Bahá’ís. Examples of this include Mullá Husayn ibn Mirzá Sulaymán, a mujtahid, Hájí Rastúl Míhrzí, Mullá Husayn Ardakání and Mullá ʿAbd al-Avrám Ardakání, all from the Yazd area (Momen 2021, pp. 349–50, 365).

When one surveys the range of individuals who are in the upper echelons of Qajar society and for whom there is some evidence of their having been Bahá’ís, it is difficult to discern any pattern to this group. Given that the Bahá’í social teachings advocate such reforms as the advancement of the role of women, modern education and democracy, one might think that there would be a predominance of those inclined towards supporting these reforms. In fact, however, one finds that they include both reformers and conservatives. It is possible to speculate that, while those who supported reforms were attracted to the social teachings of the Bahá’í religion, those who were political conservatives may have been
attracted to the more mystical writings of the Bahá’í leaders. Nor is there any geographical bias in the group. In this paper there is not any space to consider in detail the evidence for a large number of individuals. Instead, attention will be focused on the sort of evidence that exists by considering a small number of examples: individuals who were of national importance, leaving aside individuals who were only of local importance. It is also possible to identify a number of persons who are not stated to be Bahá’ís in either the standard Bahá’í or Iranian sources, and yet, on a close examination of the events of their life, they can be demonstrated to have been, at the least, very sympathetic, but possibly even secret Bahá’ís. I will examine two of these in detail: one taken from the conservative end of the political spectrum and one who supported the reformers.

2. Some Prominent Individuals Who May Have Been Bahá’ís

2.1. Qájár Family

A number of princes and princesses of the Qájár family have been asserted to have been Bahá’ís. Apart from a few individuals, there are four main family clusters that can be identified. One of the earliest was Shams-i Jahan Khánum, who was known as Hájíjíyíyí Sháházhádí Khánum and used the pen name Fítníyí. She was a daughter of Muḥammad Riḍá Mírzá Iftikhr al-Mulk, the fourteenth son of Fath-‘Alí Shah. She became a Bábí, met Qurrát ul-‘Ayn Táhiríh and visited Bahá’u’lláh in both Baghdad and Edirne. She wrote an autobiographical poem in which these events are related (Mázandarání undated, vol. 6, p. 415; Dhu‘ká’í-Baydá’í 1969, pp. 167–70, 177–82). She can be considered to have been a Bahá’í on the basis of criteria 1 and 4 above. Her full brother Muḥammad Hásím Mírzá (Jináb) and a half-brother Akbar Mírzá were also interested in the Bábí movement and attended Bábí meetings. It appears that Jináb later became a student of Mullá Hádí Sa‘zívárá and drifted away from the Bábí community (Mázandarání undated, vol. 4, pp. 43–44; Mázandarání 1971, p. 208).

Another family grouping of Bahá’ís were the descendants of Diyá’ us-Saltániyí (d. 1290/1873), the favorite daughter of Fath-‘Alí Shah. She married Mírzá Ma’súm Ansárt Garmrúdí (d. 1265/1848), who was foreign minister during the reign of Muḥammad Shah. Their daughter, Ághá Ján Sháhánsál Khánum, married Mírzá Muḥammad Qásim Qádám Tábabáyí and from this marriage had two daughters, Ághá Sháházhádí (Bádi’í) and ‘Udhrá Kháním Díyá ul-Hájíjíyíyí. The first daughter became a Bahá’í through her husband, who was a Bahá’í, sometime in the late 1870s and in turn converted, with the assistance of her husband and other Bahá’ís, her mother and sister. After the death of her first husband, Sháhánsál Khánum married Mírzá Ma’súm Khánum Ansárt Muntakhab ud-Dawlíyí, who was a Muslim relative of her first husband, and she moved to Mashhad, where her new husband had a government position, sometime in about 1880. She was put in touch with the prominent Bahá’í Ibn Aṣdáq in Mashhad and, after a time there, he married her daughter, Diyá’ ul-Hájíjíyíyí. In about 1882, they moved to Tehran, where their house in Khiyábání Amíríyíyí was a place where many of the royal family and the notables of the city were introduced to the Bahá’í religion. There are several writings of the Bahá’í leaders addressed to Ághá Ján Sháhánsál Khánum and her two daughters.10 Their descendants today claim them as Bahá’ís. Thus, they appear to have been Bahá’ís on the basis of criteria 1, 3 and 4.

A third family grouping revolved around Tahmasp (or Tahmasb) Mírzá Mu’áyyád ud-Dawlíyí, second son of Muḥammad ‘Alí Mírzá Dawlátsháh (1220–1296). He had been governor of Fars during the second Nayríz upheaval and, thus, was at least partly responsible for the killings of the Bábís in that episode. Later, however, when he was deputy governor of Khurásán in about 1864, Háji Ibráhím Túní gave him a copy of Bahá’u’lláh’s Kitáb-i Iqán and he is reported to have declared that either one had to declare oneself without religion or one had to accept the truth of the author of this book (Mázandarání undated, vol. 6, p. 74n). After this, he was in close contact with and protected Nabil-i Akbar, a prominent Bahá’í, for much of the rest of his stay in Khurásán. His sister, who is also called Shams-I Jahan Khánum (but is different to the above person of the same name),
became a Bahá’í after meeting Qurratu’l-ʿAyn ʿAlíyih in Hamadan (Gulpáygání n.d., p. 105). She took with her to this meeting her nephew, the son of Tahmasb Mírzá, Muḥammad Mahdí Mírzá, Mu’áyyad us-Sultáníih, who was years later converted in Hamadan by the learned Bahá’í scholar Mírzá Abúl-Fadl Gulpáygání, along with his son, Muḥammad Ḥusayn Mírzá Mu’áyyad us-Sultáníih (after 1916 Mu’áyyad ud-Dawlíih, 1855–1920). The latter was in the telegraph department in Tehran, then head of that department in Isfahan until 1897 and then in Shiraz from 1897 to 1905. During the Constitutionalist revolt, he sided with Muḥammad ‘Alí Shah and was pressed into becoming the head of the royal cabinet. After the shah’s defeat, he left Iran for Baghdad. At this time, he went to ‘Akka and met ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. He returned to Iran and wrote a book of Bahá’í proofs. He was in the court of Aḥmad Shah and was appointed governor of Kashan for a time, then of ‘Arabistán (Khuzistán) and died in Muḥammárah in 1339/1920, shortly after his appointment to the latter post (Mázandarání 1974–5, vol. 8a, pp. 426–27, vol. 8b, p. 832; Sulaymání 1947–75, vol. 2, pp. 266–71; Mihrábkhání 1988, pp. 136–41; Churchíll 1906, pp. 45–46; Hafezi 2011, pp. 158–59). While the evidence for Tahmasp Mírzá amounts to criteria 1 and 4, and that for Shams-i Jahan Khamír criteria 1 and 2 in the above classification, the two Mu’áyyad us-Sultáníihs, father and son, were in correspondence with the Bahá’í leaders and had Bahá’í descendants and so can be considered to have points 1, 3 and 4 in support of their being Bahá’ís.

A fourth family grouping is that of Ḥájjí Abú’l-Ḥasan Mírzá Shaykh ur-Rá’ís (1264/1848–1918), a Qájár prince who first undertook religious training and became a mujtahíd and then was a prominent figure in the reform movement. Although most Iranian histories ignore all connections between him and the Bahá’í religion, there is good evidence that he was a Bahá’í. This evidence includes his two visits to ‘Abdu’l-Bahá, his poetry that alludes strongly to Bahá’í themes and the fact that he was widely acknowledged to be a Bahá’í by both his friends and enemies during his lifetime. It appears that his mother, Khorshíd Bígum, was secretly a Bábí and raised him thus. Much of this evidence is collected in two articles by Juan Cole and therefore need not be detailed here. In brief, Ḥájjí Shaykh ur-Rá’ís satisfies criteria 1, 2, 4 and 5.

2.2. High Government Officials

Here again, we can discern a number of family groups among whose members a few appear to have become Bahá’ís. One of these is the Ghaffári family of Kashan, whose most famous member was Amín ad-Dawlíih Ghaffári, who was Minister of court for most of Náṣiru’d-Dín Sháh’s reign. His son, Mahdí Khán Vázír Humáyúün (Qá’ím-Maqám, Vázír Makhshús, Ajudán Makhshús, 1282/1865–1336/1917), was at first very opposed to the Bahá’ís, but while he was governor of Sul’tánábád in 1904, he was converted by Ḥájjí Munís, Ḥájjí Tavángar and Mullá Mírzá ‘Áqá Ṭalqání. Although he tended to be a conservative, he is credited with having persuaded Muḥaffarú’d-Dín Sháh to sign the Constitution when the latter was wavering. It is possible that the influence of the Bahá’í teachings caused this. After the Constitutional Revolution, he retired to his estate at Vádgán near Kashan. Although advised by ‘Abdu’l-Bahá to be prudent, he came to Tehran and began to teach the Bahá’í teachings openly. Then he left to visit ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Egypt in 1910 and this fact was announced in the newspapers (Sulaymání 1947–75, vol. 9, p. 315; Áváriíh 1923, vol. 2, pp. 181–83; Khoshbíín 2002, vol. 1, pp. 339–41). He satisfies criteria 1, 2, 4 and 5. When news that Vázír Humáyúün had set off to visit ‘Abdu’l-Bahá reached his family, his mother sent his older brother, Abúl-Qásim Khán Muktáhir us-Sultáníih, in pursuit to prevent the visit and save the family’s honour. Thus, Muktáhir us-Sultáníih met ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Ramláh and became a Bahá’í there. Muktáhir us-Sultáníih was killed by rebels near Khurmámarád during World War I (before 1917; Khoshbíín 2002, vol. 1, pp. 341–42). He satisfies criterion 1 only.

A cousin of these two brothers, Ghulám Ḥusayn Khán Ghaffári Amín Khálvát (Vázír Makhshús, Sáhib Ikhtíyáír), was private secretary to Náṣiru’d-Dín and Muḥaffarú’d-Dín Sháhsh until 1896, then Minister of Court. He is reported to have accepted the new religion after being taught by Nábil Zarándí in 1864. He was in friendly correspondence with Śadr
us-Şudûr, a learned Bahá’í of Tehran, and also closely associated with the Bahá’í merchant, Muhammad Hüsâyân Tabrîzî of Kashan (Sulaymânî 1947–75, vol. 10, p. 578; Rastigâr 1951, pp. 30–31; Rayhânî in Amanat 2006, p. 303). He satisfies criteria 1 and 4. His brother, Muhammad Khân Iqbal ud-Dawlih, was friendly towards the Bahá’ís while governor of Kirmanshah, and was closely associated with the Bahá’í merchant, Muhammad Hüsâyân Tabrîzî of Kashan, and with another Bahá’í Aqâ Muḥammad Karîm Maḥût-furûsh (velvet seller), Qâvâm Divân Işfâhânî. He can only therefore be confidently said to have been a sympathizer (Rayhânî in Amanat 2006, p. 303; ‘Alaqîiband Yazdî 1910, p. 230; Sulaymânî 1947–75, vol. 3, p. 147).

The Ghaffârî family was connected by marriage to the Intîzâm-us-Saltânîh family. Mîr Sayyid ‘Abdullâh Tafrîshî Intîzâm us-Saltânîh Tafrîshî (d. 1892) was the son of Mîrzâ Mûsâ, vâzîr of Tehran and brother of Mîrzâ ‘Isâ, vâzîr of Tehran (vâzîr was in effect deputy governor and in charge of finances). In 1309/1891, he succeeded Count De Monteforte as the head of the gendarmerie or police (vâzîr naẓîmiyyîh). He had become a Bahâ’í through Munajîm-bâshî, who was also from Tafrîsh, and had converted his wife, Âghâ Shâhzâdîh (Bâdî’ih), the above-mentioned Qâjîr princess. His son, Mîr Sayyid Muḥammad Intîzâm us-Saltânîh, was also a Bahâ’î (1870–1932) and was among the entourage of ‘Abdu’l-Bahâ in Paris (Bâlyuzî 1987, p. 372; Rafatî 2000). He was married to Khurshid Lîqâ, daughter of Mîrzâ Ibrâhîm Khan Mu’âvin ud-Dawlih Ghaffârî, and thus a cousin of the above-mentioned Maḥdî Khan Vâzîr Humâyûn Ghaffârî. Both father and son qualify as Bahâ’îs on points 1 and 3 (and the father on point 5 also). However, the story of the Intîzâm us-Saltânîh family is complicated by the question of multiple religious identities, since both father and son were also Sufis. Thus, Mîr Sayyid Muḥammad Intîzâm us-Saltânîh both attained a high position in the Anjuman Ukhuvvat, a branch of the Ni’matû’llahî order, and at the same time was in the entourage of ‘Abdu’l-Bahâ in Paris and there are pictures of him assuming a posture of deference to ‘Abdu’l-Bahâ. It is difficult to assess whether the participation in a Sufi order was a cover for being a Bahâ’í or whether he was able to maintain dual religious beliefs.

Others were among the entourage of ‘Abdu’l-Bahâ in Europe were the above-mentioned Mîrzâ Maḥdî Khân Ghaffârî Vâzîr Humâyûn as well as Dûst Muḥammad Khân Mu’âyîr ul-Mamâlik (d. 1913), a son-in-law of Nâṣîru’d-Dîn Shah, who accompanied ‘Abdu’l-Bahâ from London to Bristol and to Paris, being frequently seen in his company, and is accounted a Bahâ’î in some sources.12

In eastern Mâzandarân, and especially in the provincial capital Sârî, during the period leading up to and during the Constitutional Revolution, many of the leading figures in the area were Bahâ’îs or close sympathizers; some of them had national importance, such as Lutf’-Allî Khân Kulbâdî (d. 1352/1933), who, at various times, held the titles Salâr Mu’âkram, Salâr Muhtasham, Muhtasham Nîzâm and Sârdâr Jalîl, and Qâsim Khân Huzhabr Khâqân ‘Abdu’l-Malîkî Zaghmarzî (later Huzhabr ud-Dawlih). The evidence for this is presented elsewhere (Momîn 2008) and therefore need not be detailed here.

The Bahâ’í religion also penetrated a number of the most powerful tribal families of Iran. Hûsâyyn Qult Khân Mâfî (1248/1832–1326/1908) had the title Sa’d ul-Mulk until 1305/1887 and then was Nîzâm us-Saltânîh. He was from the Mâfî tribe which had relocated from their original homeland in Luristân to Fârs and subsequently to Qazvîn and is in some sources described as being from the Ahl-i Haqq religious group. Nîzâm us-Saltânîh was governor of Bushîr (1299/1881–1300/1882), Zanjan (1303/1885–1305/1887), Khuzistan (1305/1887–1308/1890, 1312/1894–1314/1897); Minister of Justice and Commerce (1315/1897–1316/1898); Minister of Finance (1316/1898–1317/1899); agent for the Crown Prince as governor of Adhârbâjîyân (1317/1899–1325/1907); and Prime Minister (1325/1907–1326/1908). He protected the Bahâ’îs whenever he was governor of a town, especially after his contact with Mullâ Rajab ‘Alî Ardakânî in Yazd (where he was governor 1291/1874–1292/1875; at this time he held the title Sa’d ul-Mulk); his wife (the sister of Mîrzâ Hûsâyyn Khân ‘Ahidîyyîh, Mâzandarânî 1974–5, vol. 8a, p. 442), his private secretary Mîrzâ Hûsâyyn Khân, his tailor Ustâd Mîrzâ Shîrâzî, his cook Mîrzâ Jalâl and indeed most of
the people in his employ were Bahá’ís (Uskú’í 1926, part 1, p. 83). His brother, Muhammad Hasan Khan Sa’d ul-Mulk (d. 1900), was governor of Bushír (1300/1882–1303/1885), of Bushír and all of the Gulf ports (1305/1885–1308/1890, 1310/1892–1312/1894), and of Luristán and Burújurd (1312/1894–1314/1896) (Bámdád 1968, vol. 1, pp. 448–56; Churchill 1906, pp. 70, 75; Varjavand 1998, vol. 3, pp. 2046–47). He was given the title Sa’d ul-Mulk in 1305/1887 when his brother became Nizám us-Saltáníh. Both Bahá’ís and European sources state that both brothers were Bahá’ís. Thus, on criteria 1, 2 and 5, they can be accounted as having probably been Bahá’ís. The fact that their cousin Karím Khán Mafi was recorded as a Bábí and later a Bahá’í of Qazvin (Mázandarání n.d., vol. 3, p. 385, vol. 6, p. 559) indicates a deeper Bahá’í penetration into this family than just these two brothers.

There is also evidence of Bahá’í penetration of the leadership of the Bakhtiyári tribe. While Ali Muhammad Varqá, a prominent Bahá’í, was in prison in Isfahan, he is reported to have converted to the Bahá’í religion his fellow prisoner, Iskandar Khán Bakhtiyárt, a son of Húsayn-Qúlí Khan Ilkhání (chief) of the Bakhtiyárt tribe (Súlaymání 1947–75, pp. 259–62; Malmírí 1992, pp. 42–43; Varqá 1994, pp. 23–24; Balyuzí 1985, pp. 78–80). His brother, ‘Alí Qúlí Khan Sardárt As’ád, one of the foremost leaders of the Constitutionalist Revolution, had, while in France, taken on a Bahá’í, Mírzá Hábíbulláh Shírází (later ‘Ayn ul-Mulk), as tutor to his children and on their return to Iran, collaborated with him in translating books from French into Persian (Miláni 2000, p. 43). Later in 1913, he met ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Paris and entertained him (Faízí 1986, p. 175). The Russian scholar and military official Alexander Tumanski, who was conducting research on the Bahá’í community, reported in 1895 that he knew of two Bakhtiyári Khans among the sons of Huseyn Qúlí Khán who were Bahá’ís (Shahvar et al. 2011, vol. 1, p. 163, vol. 2, p. 81). If this statement refers to these two brothers, then Iskandar Khán satisfies criteria 1 and 2; while ‘Ali-Qúlí Khán satisfies criteria 2, 4 and 5.

There are a few individuals who were higher placed in government but for whom the evidence is weaker (as mentioned above, this will generally be the case because they had a greater need to conceal their religious identity). For example, there are contradictory indications of the attitude towards the Báb and Bahá’í religions of Mírzá Yúsuf Khán Aštíyártí Mustawfí ul-Mamálík (1812–1886), who was in charge of the State Treasury of the time of his father’s death in 1845 and also effectively the chief minister to Náṣírú’d-Dín Shah from 1867 to 1871 and from 1873 until 1884, when he was formally appointed Prime Minister and remained such until his death. In the time of the Báb, he was presented with two of the books of the Báb and is reported to have been won over by their contents (Nábil 1970, p. 592). The government newspaper of the time reports that, at the time of the public execution of Bábís in Tehran after the attempt of the life of the Shah in 1852, he personally fired the pistol shots that killed Mullá Zaynu’l-Abídín Yazdí, but he is reported to have later written to Bahá’u’lláh denying this (Bályuzí 1985, p. 446). His close companion Mullá Hasan of Sulţánábád was an adherent of Bahá’ílláh and it is reported that, when the latter was going to Baghdad to visit Bahá’ílláh, Mustawfí asked him to ask Bahá’ílláh for prayers that a son be born to him. Bahá’ílláh is then reported to have given Mullá Hasan some sweetmeats with instructions that Mustawfí was to partake of these. Mustawfí then had a son whom he named Hasan and who inherited the title of Mustawfiyyú’l-Mamálík (Mázandarání undated, vol. 6, pp. 345–46). In 1868, he was instrumental in getting Bahá’ílláh’s half-brother Mírzá Ridá Qúlí freed after he had been imprisoned in Tehran for being a “Bábí” (Mázandarání undated, vol. 5, p. 487). He is also reported to have eventually come to believe in Bahá’ílláh through Mírzá Mahmúd Khán Balúch (‘Abdu’l-Bahá 1971, pp. 92–93; Fu’ádi Bushrú’í 2007, pp. 400–1; Ishráq-Khávárí 2004, p. 242). He may thus be considered to have satisfied criteria 1, 4 and 5 for being a Bahá’í.

Similarly, Mírzá Sa’íd Anšártí Mu’támí ul-Mulk (1815–1884) was, for many years, the Foreign Minister of Iran (1852–1873, 1880–1884). Although Anšártí carried out a number of actions against the Bábí and Bahá’í movements, including taking part in the executions of Bahá’ílláhs in 1852 and pressing for the exile of Bahá’ílláh from Baghdad to Istanbul in 1862–3, he is also reported to have met Bahá’ílláh in Tehran and to have been friendly towards the
Bábís and Bahá’ís. When Mushír ud-Dawlih was Prime Minister, Anşárí was dismissed from his post as Foreign Minister and was appointed the chief custodian of the Shrine of Imam Rídá in Mashhad (1873–1880). One source reports that during the interrogation of the Bahá’í Hájí ‘Abdu’l-Majíd Nishápu’rí in Mashhad by the governor Rúkn ud-Dawlih, Anşárí urged Nishápu’rí to say some words of denial of his faith in order to save himself. Anşárí is then reported to have said: “You know that Bahá’u’lláh mentioned my name in the Tablet to Náṣírú’d-Dín Shah and I also am a believer in this Cause. But it is necessary to preserve oneself. Come, the Prince [Rúkn ud-Dawlih] does not want to spill your blood, so just say that I am not of this sect” (Fu’ādī Bushrū’í 2007, p. 79; Ishráq-Khávari 1987, pp. 687–99; see also Balyuzí 1980, p. 446; Mázandarānī undated, vol. 6, p. 39). Anşárí’s knowledge of the new religion may have come from his cousin’s daughter, Āghá Ján Sháhansháh Khánūn (see above). This anecdote suggests that the Shí’i culture of taqiyá (see above) may have lingered among some Bahá’ís in the higher echelons of Qájár society (such as Anşárí), while it was disappearing among the generality of the Bahá’ís (exemplified by Nishápu’rí who refused to practice taqiyá and was executed). However, this is to be expected since these high-ranking individuals needed to keep themselves isolated from the Bahá’í community for their own safety and so would also be less influenced by changes taking place in the culture of the community.

However, the situation is very complicated and not easy to unravel. For example, Mírzá ‘Alí Asghar Khán Amín us-Sultán, who was Prime Minister for most of the latter part of Náṣíru’d-Dín Shah’s reign and also part of Múzaffaru’d-Dín Shah’s reign, is said to have been a secret Bahá’í in a report from Col. E.C. Ross, British Consul in Bushihr, in September 1888 (Momen 1980, p. 247). Although this statement is not corroborated in Bahá’í sources, he was in correspondence with the Bahá’í leadership and did act to protect the Bahá’ís on several occasions, most notably after the assassination of Náṣíru’d-Dín Shah when he acted energetically to suppress the initial rumour that this had been the work of “Bábís”, and to establish the fact that it was a follower of Sayyid Jamálu’d-Dín Asadábád who was responsible (Mázandarānī 1974–5, vol. 8a, pp. 534–35; Sulaymáni 1947–75, pp. 454–55). Thus interestingly, he is an individual who satisfies criteria 2, 4 and 5 and may have become close to being a Bahá’í in the 1890s but then drifted away from the community and did not make any great effort as Prime Minister to contain the anti-Bahá’í pogrom in Yazd in 1903.

3. Identity as a Bahá’í Based on Patterns of Behavior

Finally, in this paper, I propose to examine the lives of two individuals who are not regarded as having been Bahá’ís in the standard Iranian or Bahá’í histories,14 and yet a close reading of the record of their lives yields several lines of evidence for both individuals indicating that they may indeed have been secret believers in the new religion or close sympathizers. These two are of interest in that they span the political spectrum, one being a staunch conservative and the other having eventually sided with the reformers.

‘Abdu’l-Ḥusayn Mírzá Farmánfarmá (1858–1939) was a Qájár grandee whose father, Firúz Mírzá Nuṣrát ud-Dawlih, was a brother of Múḥammad Shah. Farmánfarmá was himself closely connected with Múzaffaru’d-Dín Shah. He was married to the Shah’s daughter and his sister was the Shah’s favorite wife. The starting point of our investigation is the fact that Náṣírú’d-Dín Shah appointed a Bábí, Mullá Ibráhím Mullá-báshí, as the tutor to Farmánfarmá and his older brother, ‘Abdu’l-Hamíd Mírzá Náṣír ud-Dawlih, while he was governor of Sultánábád (in the late 1850s). This must of course raise questions about the religious allegiance of Náṣírú’d-Dín Shah when he acted energetically to suppress the initial rumour that this had been the work of “Bábís”, and to establish the fact that it was a follower of Sayyid Jamálu’d-Dín Asadábád who was responsible (Mázandarānī 1974–5, vol. 8a, pp. 534–35; Sulaymáni 1947–75, pp. 454–55). Thus interestingly, he is an individual who satisfies criteria 2, 4 and 5 and may have become close to being a Bahá’í in the 1890s but then drifted away from the community and did not make any great effort as Prime Minister to contain the anti-Bahá’í pogrom in Yazd in 1903.
about 1910 (Thabit 1997, p. 55) and sent his children to the Tarbiyat schools. A property that Farmānfarma owned in Kirmānshāh was rented by a Bahá’í, Mīrzā Muhammad Ṣarrāf Isfahānī. The remains of the Báb were placed there for one or two nights on their way from Iran to ‘Akka in 1898. When the Bahá’ís approached Farmānfarma in 1920 to purchase the property as it was regarded as a holy site, he gave it to them without any recompense.

Farmānfarma’s sons, Firuz Mīrzā Nuṣrat ud-Dawlih and Muḥammad ‘Alī Mīrzā, were among the Qajār princes who met ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Paris (Faizi 1986, p. 304; Jasion 2012, pp. 140, 319). In a telegram dated 15 January 1917, Col. Hugh Gough, the British Consul in Shiraz—who was well informed about the Bahá’í community in Shiraz as his Persian secretary, Mīrzā Faḍlullāh Banān, was a Bahá’í—lists some of the prominent Bahá’ís in Shiraz, adding that “the Governor-General’s son Firūz Mīrzā is also said to be one [a Bahá’í].” As mentioned above, Farmānfarma’s older brother, ‘Abdu’l-Ḥamīd Mīrzā Nāṣir ud-Dawlih, protected the Bahá’ís during the time he was governor of Kirman. He married the daughter of one of the most active Bahá’í women of Rafsanjān. There are thus many indicators that Farmānfarma and possibly his brother and son may have been crypto-Bahá’ís.

From the other end of the political spectrum was Muḥammad Valī Khān Tunukābunī, who held the titles Naṣr us-Salṭanānī and Sipahsālār-i A’zam, and who was governor of Rasht 1899–1903. At first, he supported Muḥammad ‘Alī Shah but then emerged in February 1909 as commander of the Constitutionalist forces, which, after taking Rasht, marched on Tehran and entered it in July 1909, forcing Muḥammad ‘Alī Shah’s abdication. He was then Prime Minister several times and held some other important posts until his death in 1926. It is not possible to be certain what early connections he had with the Bahá’í community, but it is possible this was through Sularyān Khān Tunukābunī (Jamāl Effendi), a prominent Bahá’í who was from the same Khal ‘atbarī family as Muḥammad Valī Khān (they were the largest land-owners in Tunukābun). In any case, in 1899, ‘Alī Qulī Khan, a Bahá’í from a prominent family, stated that the Bahá’ís of Rasht knew him to be a Bahá’í when he was governor there and ‘Alī Qulī Khan approached him as a Bahá’í for help to obtain a passport to go to ‘Akka to assist ‘Abdu’l-Bahá with translation work. The British Consul at Rasht reported that the people of Rasht in 1903 also thought that he was a Bahá’í (Momen 1980, p. 375). Finally, the French Oriental scholar Nicolas reports that when he was French Consul in Tabriz in 1912, Muḥammad Valī Khān (then Governor of Tabriz) called on him: “The conversation revolved entirely around the Báb, with whose doctrines my guest seemed to agree” (Momen 1980, p. 515). Muḥammad Valī Khān was among those Iranian notables who met ‘Abdu’l-Bahá in Paris in 1913 and was in touch with the Bahá’ís there. Hence, although he is not listed as a Bahá’í in any of the standard Bahá’í histories or in any Iranian histories, the facts of his life do provide some prima facie evidence that he may indeed have been a crypto-Bahá’í. It is also possible to speculate that his Bahá’í sympathies may have been an underlying cause for his switch from the Royalist to the Constitutionalist side.

4. Conclusions

This paper has addressed the question of the nature of religious identity and the possible presence of many Bahá’ís or Bahá’í sympathizers in the upper echelons of Qajār Iran. It has identified five criteria by which individuals can be identified as having been Bahá’ís and has suggested that, since none of these are usually conclusive by themselves, there should be several lines of evidence across more than one of these criteria before we label someone as possibly having been a Bahá’í or a close sympathizer. It has listed a number of examples of people from the Qajār royal family and from among the highest echelons of the Qajār administration who fulfill these criteria. It has noted that they were from all shades of opinion across the political spectrum (from reformists to conservatives). It has also looked at two individuals who have not been claimed to be Bahá’ís in the usual Iranian and Bahá’í histories, and yet, if a close study of their lives is made, considerable evidence can be accumulated that they may have been crypto-Bahá’ís or close sympathizers. In all, this paper indicates that there may have been many Bahá’ís in the upper strata of
Qâjâr society, and that this is a factor that has not previously been sufficiently recognized and needs to be examined for the light that it may shed on other matters.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

**Notes**

1. For more about this complex issue, see (Lambden 2022; Maneck 1996). In his writings, MacEoin (see for example 1983, pp. 226–27) equates *hikmat* and *taqyiq*, which is incorrect, as I have indicated in the text. This matter is, however, more complex than can be dealt with in a footnote.

2. For example, Jamâl Effendi was sent to Iran to be ‘Abdu’l-Bahâ’i’s intermediary for a message sent privately to Amin us-Sultân (‘Abdu’l-Bahâ 1971, pp. 137–38).

3. Information was given to the present writer by Mr Hasan Balyuzi whose father, Muvaqqar ud-Dawlih, was governor of the Gulf Ports at the beginning for the twentieth century and a Bahâ’i; his mother was also a Bahâ’i; notes of interview, 23 June 1977. Similar information was given to the present writer by Feraydoun Hoveyda, whose father, Mirzâ Ḥabīb’l-lâh ʿAyn ul-Mulk, was an Iranian ambassador based in Beirut; personal communication, 25 April 2005. In this latter case, however, the mother was not a Bahâ’î.

4. There may of course be a great deal of relevant, perhaps even definitive, information in Iranian government archives and in the Bahâ’î World Centre archives, but these are at present inaccessible.

5. For Bahâ’î assertions that he was a Bâbî and then a Bahâ’î, see (Mâzandarâni n.d., vol. 3, pp. 437–41n). This is supported by a non-Bahâ’î Iranian historian (Bâmdâd 1968, vol. 3, p. 452). For those asserting he was not a Bâbî or Bahâ’î, see (Mudarrisî-Châhrâdî 1972, pp. 167–71; Kazemîbeykî 1980, pp. 272–3, n. 111). For more details of this controversy, see (Momen 2015, pp. 304–5n).

6. See for example the letter of Amin us-Sultan to Mirzâ-yi Shirazi in Rajab 1309 (Ṣâfî’i 1976, p. 318), and a similar letter in Jamadi II 1309 in which he accuses those stirring up agitation against the Tobacco Regie of being Bâbis (Najâfi and Rasûl 1994, vol. 2, p. 183). See also the dispatch of Henry Longworth, the British Consul at Trebizond, who states that Asadâbâdî is the head of the “Bâbis” (Momen 1980, pp. 362–63).

7. (Ṣifìdvash 1999, pp. 88–9). Although he has Bahâ’î descendants and some have claimed him as a Bahâ’î, it is clear from ʿAbdu’l-Bahâ’i’s words (Ṣifìdvash 1999, p. 88; Mâzandarâni undated, vol. 7, p. 316) that he regarded him as a sympathizer rather than a believer.

8. For example, Zill us-Sultan released the Bahâ’î ʿAlî Muḥammad Khân Vârqâ from prison in 1883 partly because he was hoping that the Bahâ’îs would assist him in his bid for the throne and partly because Vârqâ had assisted Zill us-Sultân’s confidant Ḥâji Sayyâh in Tabriz (Momen 2021, p. 24).

9. See for example (Feuvrier 1906, pp. 101–2), who makes this assertion. Doctor Feuvrier was Nasîr al-Dîn Shah’s personal physician in the early 1890s.

10. (Mâzandarâni undated, vol. 6, pp. 36–37; Brookshaw 2008, pp. 50–52); see also memorandum by Malik-Khusravi in (Arbâb 1990, p. 507) which gives slightly different details.


13. (Mâzandarâni 1971, undated, vol. 6, p. 559, vol. 8a, p. 77) states that Nizâm al-Saltânih was a close sympathizer and his brother Sa’d ul-Mulk was a Bahâ’î but a report from the British Consul in Bushîr, Col. E.C. Ross, in September 1888, states that both brothers were Bahâ’îs (Momen 1980, p. 247). Hasan Balyuzi who was closely familiar with all aspects of the Gulf confirmed that both were Bahâ’îs (Momen 1980, p. 247) (my footnote on this page was on the basis of the information given to me by Mr Balyuzi). See also (Bâmdâd 1968, vol. 1, pp. 448–56; Varjâvand 1998, vol. 3, pp. 2054–46).

14. By standard Bahâ’î historical sources, it is meant such works as (Mâzandarâni 1971, undated, 9 vols; Āvârî 1923; Balyuzi 1980, 1985, 1987). By standard Iranian historical sources, it is meant such works as (Bâmdâd 1968; Malikzâdî 1949; Nâzîm ul-Īslâm 1967; Kazemîbeykî 2003).

15. His daughter, Sattâreh Farman Farmaian (1992, p. 49), and his son, Khodadad Farman Farmaian (1982), attended the Tarbiyat school (he was later director of the Shah’s Plan Organization).
16 (Faizi 1986, pp. 303–4). There are other hints of Farmānfarma’s allegiance to the Bahā’ī religion. Thus, for example, he named his estate and gardens in Tajrish north of Tehran the Rīvānīyīyīyīyī (possibly after the Garden of Rīvān associated with Bahā’u’llāh); (Farmanfarmaian 1982).

17 Telegram from Gough to Sir Charles Marling, British Envoy at Tehran, FO 248 1159, Public Record Office, London.

18 ‘Ali Quli Khan needed a passport to get to ‘Akka but his family had sent word to Muhammad Vali Khān that he should be detained at Rasht. “Khan, however, approached him and whispered in his ear, ‘The Bahā’ī Faith has reached America and they need translations of the sacred writings into English. I would therefore be useful to ‘Abdu’l-Bahā in ‘Akka. It is urgent that I should go to Him.’ The result was, the Governor issued one passport for Khan.” (Gail 1987, p. 100).

19 Tunukābunī had been given a copy of ‘Abdu’l-Bahā’s book Mufawidāt (Some Answered Questions, edited by Laura Clifford Barney). He had, as a young man, heard an eye-witness account of the execution of Bādī, Bahā’u’llāh’s messenger to Nāshīrū’d-Dīn Shāh, and has written a moving account of this on the margins of a page of this copy of Mufawidāt. See (Balyuzi 1980, pp. 300–9) (including photographic reproduction of one page of the account of the execution of Bādī in Tunukābunī’s hand-writing).

References
