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Transformations in 19th Century Iran: From Slavery to Emancipation

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The study of slavery and the slave trade has attracted the attention of scholars in the past few decades. The history of slavery and the slave trade in Iran is connected to broader study of the Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean. The slave trade in the Indian Ocean represents one of the most interesting grounds for studying cultural diversity, maritime activity and commerce with politics and social history. The Atlantic world slavery is widely recognized as a unit of academic study, while the complexity of the slave trade in Islamic societies, its social, religious and historical dimension is least known and requires deeper insights. Most studies have focused on the Atlantic slave trade and the involvement of European and American traders, thereby ignoring the internal trade within Africa and the substantial number of Africans that were taken into Asia. The bias for the Atlantic segment of this trade also led to the second issue: the focus on Christian traders and the role of Christian and European humanitarians in the abolition of the slave trade. In recent years, however, scholars such as Paul Lovejoy, Edwards Alpers, Ehud Toledano, Susan Miers, and Gwyn Campbell, just to mention a few names, have published substantially on the role of slavery in the Ottoman Empire, North Africa and the Indian Ocean. Nevertheless, such an interest is yet to develop in Iran. No study of slavery and the slave trade in Iran has so far been undertaken. My dissertation is the first full study of slavery in Iran. It is a contribution to

understanding Islamic societies, slavery, the African Diaspora, as well as Iranian history. My study on Iran is a contribution to this new attempt to discover the existence of Africans in non-European societies. This research is particularly interesting and necessary because it provides the opportunity to show the global dimension of slavery and the African diaspora. Thus, by showing the factor of slavery in Iran, it is possible not only to show links between Iran and Africa but also to show slavery and the African diaspora as a continuum, which flows from America to Europe, Africa, Asia, and from African indigenous religious practices to Euro-American Christianity and Iran's Islamic tradition. By examining this global dimension, one could go ahead to undertake a comparative study of slavery.

The trade in African slaves was based on a systematic organization from the point of enslavement to the final destination in Iran. Once slaves were purchased, they were put to work in different locations and particular socioeconomic sectors. The particular economic and social circumstances of various places determined the ways in which enslaved Africans were employed. For example, in coastal regions enslaved Africans were mainly used in fishing, while in Baluchistān, agricultural slaves, and in the interior, domestic slaves were in high demand. Ethiopia -- especially the Gurage area -- was an important centre for the supply of slaves to the Iranian market. The continuing practice of zar spirit possession in Iran is attributable to the enslaved Africans imported from these regions, since zar was widely practiced among the Gallas and the people of Gurage and Shoa.³³

The development of the trade in African slaves was given religious justification on the grounds of the need to convert a large number of Africans to Islam. In Islamic societies, religion was consciously used to justify enslavement. The culture and nature of slavery in Islamic societies derived from Islamic tenets. Islam had laws regulating the treatment, sources, marriage

and emancipation of slaves. Slaves were considered to be part of the household, and since Islam opened many ways for their liberation they could gradually be absorbed into the society. Slaves sometimes ran away to acquire freedom, which indicates that the mechanisms of emancipation sanctioned by Islam did not always work.

The decision of the Iranian authorities to give freedom letters to slaves was based on three different types of regulation: international agreements, most importantly the Brussels Act; Islamic law; and state law, which was partly rooted in the sharī'a and the abolitionist agreements. The principal emphasis of the 1848 farman, 1851, 1857 and 1882 agreements was the prohibition of the importation of African slaves, the punishment of slave dealers and the freedom of slaves found on ships. In spite of this, there were still factors limiting the implementation of these policies. For example, the sphere of the agreements only covered the sea-borne trade and not internal slavery. Liberation only applied to the newly imported African slaves, and domestic slaves had no right to claim their freedom. The time at which a slave had been imported into Iran determined whether he or she was entitled to freedom. Runaway slaves proclaimed their freedom based on the abolitionist agreements that prohibited the importation of African slaves.

By signing the Brussels Agreement in 1890, Iran appeared to have taken a big step toward prohibiting the slave trade and liberating slaves. The Brussels conference had several references to the liberation of runaway slaves that countries such as Iran, where domestic slavery was lawful, had to abide by. Accordingly, Iran made significant efforts to free fugitive slaves. Article Sixty-four indicates that “[e]very fugitive slave arriving at the frontier of any of the powers mentioned in Article LXII [countries whose institutions recognized domestic slavery]

shall be considered free, and shall have the right to claim letters of liberation from the competent authorities.”¹

Islam opened the gate for the emancipation² of slaves. Based on the sharī’a, an Islamic society should move toward the emancipation of slaves. Females were given as a wife or taken as a *ḡīghah*, or concubine, by the master himself. According to Qur’ān an Islamic government should use *zakāt*, or alms, to eight situations; one is to ransom slaves. Therefore an Islamic government was obliged to be involved in a campaign that gradually would lead to the emancipation of all slaves.³ There were other Islamic laws that made individuals responsible for the liberation of slaves. For example, slave liberation was obligatory in the case of a religious expiation (*kaffāra*) as a penalty for not fulfilling a *Ramāzān* fast or not acting on undertaken vows (the law of *ḡadaqāt*). This law is derived from various verses of the Qur’ān.⁴ A slave was to be freed through purchase by the *maḡram*⁵ (the law of *Tamalluk Arḡām*). The *umm walad*, or the female slave who gave birth to the child of her owner, would become free after the death of her master (the law of *Istilād*). According to Qur’ān 24/33, slaves have the right to purchase their freedom through work (the law of *Mukātibah*).⁶

The state law, in the case of manumission, originated from both international abolitionist agreements and Islamic law. However, the state could not always fulfill its commitment to both laws. Faced with contradictions, in particular in the case of the liberation of female slaves, the state relied on Islamic law to prevent social disruption.

¹ Political Department, General Act of the Brussels Conference, Article LXIV, Bombay Castle, 8 June 1891, R/15/1/199.

² *’itq* or *i’ṭāq* are the Arabic terms for manumission.

³ Qur’ān, al-Taubah: 60.

⁴ Qur’ān, al-Mujādilah: 3; al-Mā’idah: 89; al-Nisā: 92.

⁵ The Islamic law of being in a degree of consanguinity precluding marriage.

Gender was a decisive factor in determining the practicability of freedom. There were more opportunities for male slaves to run away or liberate themselves. The freedom of female slaves required compliance with certain social and religious issues. According to Islamic law, marriage with a *kanīz* was permitted in order to prevent moral disruption.⁷ Apparently, at this time seeking legal freedom for female slaves -- especially the married -- was almost impossible. Social relationships and family structures were affected profoundly by the liberation of slaves. While the state strongly supported liberation, slave owners wanted slavery to continue and sought religious justifications for its continuation.

Slave masters objected to British efforts to liberate runaway concubines and requested their return. From the owner's perspective, a female slave was considered to be a lawful wife, whose freedom not only would break the family chain, but also was against the *sharī'a*. The pressure of the government to control fugitive *kanīzes* was to a great extent due to the need to stabilize social relationships and was interwoven with the old customs and the *sharī'a*. Iranian officials, who had faced obstacles during the process of the liberation of female slaves, demanded a solution from the central government. In a letter, 'Alī, an Iranian official, stated that manumitting married female slaves who had escaped was against the *sharī'a*. He added that this action created trouble in society:

Many of them [*kanīzes*] have husbands and children. Once they experience a little difficulty [in their life], they runaway from their husbands, come to the British consulate and make troubles. The consulate supports them and asks [the Iranian government] to issue their freedom letter. The consulate does not care that these *kanīzes* were legally married, and have husbands and children.⁸

⁶ Schacht, *An Introduction to Islamic Law*, 129; Muhammad Hamidullah, *Introduction to Islam* (Paris: Centre Culturel Islamique, 1957), 127; □usaynī, *Bardigī az Dīdgāh-i Islām*, 39–43.

⁷ Qur'ān, al-Nisā: 25.

⁸ 'Alī to Mushīr al-Daula, Folder 4, Box 3, 17 Mu□arram, 1317, VUK.

Naḳrullāh Mushīr al-Daula, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, stated that according to the Shāh's *farmān*, the British had no right to liberate *kanīzes* who had been bought before the abolitionist agreements between Iran and Britain (1875).⁹ In 1901, the Iranian government's representative at Lingah and 'Abbāsī sent a letter to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, stating that many enslaved Iranian *kanīzes* of Rudbār in Baluchistān had taken refuge at the British consul and were asking for their freedom letters. He wanted instructions on how Iranian officers should act, since the slaves were Muslim and the enslavement of Muslims was against Islamic law.¹⁰ In response, Mushīr al-Daula issued a decree stating, "If [the slaves] live as the legally married wives, there is no problem, but if they are *kanīz*, that means, if they are being sold and bought, then they must be liberated."¹¹

What we gather from this statement is a conditional liberation of slaves based on Islamic injunctions. It was a response to internal need, custom and socio-religious practice. On one hand, it opens the gate of freedom to those who might be subject to exploitation, and on the other, it preserves the social structure, and a gradual transition from slavery to freedom.

The Ottoman Empire and Iran were neighboring countries whose political, linguistic and social structures were interwoven. Many aspects of political and intellectual reform in these two countries were parallel -- among them matters relating to slavery, namely the nationality of slaves, the nature of slavery, the employment of slaves and the crucial role played by the British in abolishing the African slave trade.

In Iran, however, the external opposition to the slave trade and slavery alone cannot account for the eventual elimination of slavery. Indeed, local anti-slavery movements ultimately

⁹ 'Alī to Mushīr al-Daula, File 4, Box 3, 13 Rabī al-thānī, 1317, VUK.

¹⁰ The agency of 'Abbāsī and Lingah, File 4, Box 3, 6 Dhī al-Qa'dah, 1319, VUK.

¹¹ Naḳrullāh Mushīr al-Daula, File 4, Box 3, 25 Dhī al-ḳajjah, 1319, VUK.

were responsible for the emancipation of slaves. One of the immediate consequences of the abolition of slave importation was the increased enslavement of Iranians. In other words, in the face of continuing demand for slaves both within Iran and elsewhere, the absence of new foreign slaves resulted in the enslavement of an increasing number of Iranians. The vulnerability of Iranians was a major factor that caused many of their religious leaders -- and ultimately the political elites -- to question the legitimacy of slavery.

The trade in Iranian slaves provoked reformers and drew their attention to slavery during the Constitutional Revolution (1906–1911). The people of Khurāsān province protested against insecurity, injustice and the trade in Iranians. Therefore, a movement formed by members of the lower social classes, intellectuals and constitutionalist ‘ulamā demanded that the monarch reform the social and judicial system. The call for equality and justice in the eastern provinces coincided with the national Constitutionalist Revolution and the formation of the *Majlis*, or parliament.

The abolition of slavery as a national issue combined with the demand for the formation of a parliament. Members of the constitutionalist press, such as *Qabl al-Matīn*, criticized governmental inaction against the enslavement of inhabitants of Khurāsān, Kirmān and Sīstān provinces.¹² The anti-governmental efforts of nationalists and intellectuals sought justice, equality and the end of slavery. In 1906, Sayyid Muḥammad ibn ‘Iddīq al-‘usaynī ‘abā‘ābā’ī (1841–1920), a *mujtahid* and one of the religious and political leaders of *Mashru‘īyat* (Constitution), wrote a letter to Muḥaffar al-Dīn Shāh asking for the establishment of the ‘*Adālat Khāna*, or the House of Justice, in order to end slavery and poverty in the country:

Last year they [government officials] took the daughters of Quchān in lieu of three Ray [35.61 kg] wheat tax that they [peasants] did not have to pay, then sold them for a high price to Turkomans and Armenians in ‘Ishqābād...[the establishment of] *Majlis-i ‘Adālat*

¹² Najmabadi, *The Story of the Daughters of Quchan*, 35, 39, 79.

[parliament of justice] or a council comprised of [representatives of] all social groups of people where the Shāh and beggar are equal could bring justice for people.¹³

On 16 July 1906, □abā□ābā'ī spoke to the people on the significance of establishing a parliament and bringing justice to Iran:

Have you not heard the story of Quchān that there was no produce from cultivation last year, and each Muslim in Quchān should pay 3 Ray wheat as tax. Because the people were poor and had no means of paying, the governor took 300 Muslim girls in lieu of wheat tax, each girl for 12 Man [36 kg] wheat and sold them to Turkomans.¹⁴

The 'ulamā, merchants and the common people demanded the establishment of an '*Adālat Khāna* (the house of justice). On 5 August, Mu□affār al-Din Shāh issued the Constitutional Decree and the inauguration of the *Majlis-i Shurā-yi Millī*, or the National Consultative Assembly.¹⁵ The formation of the constitutionalist *Majlis* assured Iranians that they could raise their voices for justice and equality through the new parliament. The issue of the enslavement of Iranians was brought up at the *Majlis*. The parliament firmly moved toward improving social and judicial conditions. The improvement of the judicial system in order to ban slavery became central to the *Majlis* agenda.

Up until this time the slave trade had provided financial benefit to two groups: slave dealers and local governors who received governmental taxes and were sometimes involved directly in the trade. The enslavement of Muslim Iranians was against religious and national interests. The *Majlis* regarded slavery as an abomination and made great efforts to reform the judicial and political system in order to end the trade. In 1906, the parliament reviewed the issues surrounding the Turkoman attack on Khurāsān, the enslavement of its inhabitants and the

¹³ Kirmānī, *Tārīkh-i Bīdārī*, 339; Malikzāda, *Tārīkh-i Inqilāb*, II, 120–122.

¹⁴ Kirmānī, *Tārīkh-i Bīdārī*, I, 376.

negligence of Āqāf al-Daula, the governor of the province. In principle, evidence at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs confirmed the existence of the slave trade, which the parliament used as a starting point to pursue further the investigation. A testimony of five thousand Iranian inhabitants of ‘Ishqābād confirmed the sale of Quchānī children to Turkomans in the city.¹⁶

Ratifying a national law and overseeing its implementation were the main tasks of parliament. The parliament could request the release of slaves or ransom them, and the Ministry of the Interior and the cabinet could implement the order.¹⁷ On 17 February 1907, a telegram from Iranian residents of ‘Ishqābād was read in the parliament: “We 5,000 Iranians living in ‘Ishqābād swear to honor religion and Islam and take the God as witness that we saw with our eyes that the Quchānī children were being sold like sheep and other animals to Turkomans in ‘Ishqābād.”¹⁸ The representatives of the parliament demanded the punishment of Āqāf al-Daula, the

governor of Khurāsān, who in a single day had sold 160 Quchānī girls.¹⁹

The continuation of the trade in Iranian slaves and the grievances of local people were brought to the attention of Muqaffar al-Din Shāh. He issued a decree allocating some T35,000 to the governments of Quchān and Bujnūrd to be used toward the liberation of slaves.²⁰ Also, Sardār Afkham was appointed governor of Astarābād and was put in charge of releasing or ransoming slaves.²¹

¹⁵ Kirmānī, *Tārīkh-i Bīdārī*, 436–443, 481.

¹⁶ Majlis, 4 Muqarram 1325.

¹⁷ Majlis, 13 Muqarram 1325.

¹⁸ Kirmānī, *Tārīkh-i Bīdārī*, II, 91; Āqāmad Kasravī, *Tārīkh-i Mashru‘a-yi Īrān* (Tīhrān: Amīr Kabīr, 1370), 226–228.

¹⁹ Kirmānī, *Tārīkh-i Bīdārī*, 92.

²⁰ Majlis, 18 Muqarram 1325.

²¹ Najmabadi, *The Story of the Daughters of Quchan*, 23; Majlis, 13 Rabī al-Awwal 1325.

The parliament and newspapers were also critical of the internal policy of the government against slavery. On 12 May 1907, the National Consultative *Majlis* issued a formal announcement:

To all compatriots and all of humankind, whether residents of Iran or elsewhere, the Holy National Consultative Majlis proclaims that anyone who knows anything about the situation of women and girls who anywhere along the Khurasan border-lands have been sold to the Turkomans or have been taken captive should write their information, specify their place of residence and send a signed copy of it through any possible means to the respected National Consultative Majlis, so that necessary actions for their release and retrieval could be taken with full knowledge.²²

On 20 June 1907, a commission of inquiry under the new Minister of Justice, Farmān Farmā, and six representatives²³ from the *Majlis* commenced an investigation into the enslavement of Quchānīs. Mahdī Malikzāda states that the issue of the enslavement of Quchānī children prepared the ground for a public revolt in Tihṙān. In July 1907, thousands of people in favour of a constitution marched to the parliament and demanded the punishment of sellers of Iranian children.²⁴ After judicial hearings the Ministry of Justice issued its findings: Sālār Mufakham was dismissed as the government official. He was also ordered to pay T300 to the relatives of slaves. ‘Ayn al-Daula were condemned. *Majlis* demanded the resignation of Āqā al-Daula from his post as the governor of Khurāsān,²⁵ and he was ordered to pay T2,000.²⁶ Amīr Ḥusayn Khān, the son of Āqā al-Daula, was dismissed as the government official for a period of two years and

²² Najmabadi, *The Story of the Daughters of Quchan*, 95.

²³ The representatives of Majlis were Sayyid Ḥasan Taqīzāda, Āqā Muḥammad Yazdī, Vakīl al-Tujjār, Āqā Sayyid Mahdī, Āqā Mīrzā Maḥmūd Khaunsārī, Āqā Sayyid Ḥusayn Burujidī and Āqā Mīrzā Bābā, see Najmabadi, *The Story of the Daughters of Quchan*, 98.

²⁴ Malikzāda, *Tārīkh-i Inqilāb*, III, 65.

²⁵ Aḥmad Kasravī, *Tārīkh-i Mashruḥa-yi Īrān* (Tihṙān: Amīr Kabīr, 1370), 480.

²⁶ Ādamīyat, *Īdiuluzhī-i Nihzat-i Mashruḥiyat-i Īrān*, 406; Najmabadi, *The Story of the Daughters of Quchan*, 25

was ordered to pay T3,000.²⁷ Sardār Afkham, the former governor of Astarābād, was condemned for negligence in pursuing Turkomans in his district. He had to pay T5,000 and was given a one-year dismissal from his official position.²⁸

Throughout the first *Majlis*, discussion of the enslavement of Iranians in northeastern and eastern Iran continued. In May 1908, the representative of Kirmān stated that justice and equality must be implemented in all parts of the country and that slavery should be abolished: “Now, the constitution is established, and blacks and whites are the same before the constitutional law, I seriously request from all the respectful representatives [of the *Majlis*] to prohibit this abominable act [slavery and the slave trade]”.²⁹ Muḥammad ‘Alī Shāh (r.1907–1909) was not in favour of the constitution and ordered the bombardment of the parliament. In 1908, during the reign of Muḥammad ‘Alī Shāh, and throughout the 1920s, the Turkomans regularly invaded eastern cities, making the road between Mashhad and Simnān unsafe by attacking trade and pilgrimage caravans and taking women and children into slavery.³⁰

From the last decade of the reign of Nāḥir al-Dīn Shāh, the idea of liberty and constitutionalism was promoted by intellectuals. Mīrzā Fatḥ ‘Alī Ākhūnd Zāda (1812–1878), an intellectual born into an Iranian family in Shakī, Caucasus, moved to Iran and advocated a constitutional regime. He addressed Iranians in 1863: “Oh! Iranians! If you could realize the advantage of liberty and human rights, you would have never tolerated slavery and humiliation.”³¹ In 1875, Ākhūnd Zāda, “strongly criticized inequality between man and woman, Muslim and non-Muslim, slave and freeman.”³² Ākhūnd Zādah

²⁷ Najmabadi, *The Story of the Daughters of Quchan*, 112.

²⁸ Najmabadi, *The Story of the Daughters of Quchan*, 26.

²⁹ *Majlis*, Rabī‘ al-Thānī 1326.

³⁰ Malikzāda, *Tarīkh-i Inqilāb*, V, 102.

³¹ Hairī, *Shī‘m and Constitutionalism*, 26.

criticized slavery and pointed out the law of “freedom of individuals.” He argued that slavery, the slave trade and castration were against freedom and as such must be prohibited.³³

Malkum Khān (1833-1908), who was born into an Armenian family and then converted to Islam, developed a theory of constitutionalism in Iran.³⁴ He was influenced by the Ottoman constitutionalist movement while he was there from 1863 to 1871. He wrote *Daftar-i Tanzīmāt* (The Book of Reforms) and more than two hundred treatises, which dealt with law, equality, the judiciary, freedom, the national consultative assembly and other social, economic and administrative subjects.³⁵

It is noteworthy to refer to the discourse of anti-slavery addressed by the constitutional thinkers. In the 1900s, opposition to slavery among Iranian intellectuals developed strongly. A similar phenomenon in the Ottoman Empire can be observed from the mid-1870s onward.³⁶ The new parliament was a source of hope to the common people who were seeking justice. The idea of equality and anti-slavery was profoundly interwoven with the tenets of the *Mashru‘īyat* (Constitution). Ājjī Sayyid ‘Abdul‘a‘īm ‘Imād al-‘Ulamā Khalkhālī was one of the ‘ulamā who advocated the doctrine of equality as the principle of the *Mashru‘īyat*. From his point of view, God created equality for human beings.³⁷ Fakhr al-‘Ulamā Shaykh Mahdī was one of the ‘ulamā who viewed the *Mashru‘īyat* as a great progress toward ending the traffic in slaves. He criticized the political system that led Iranian peasants to sell their daughters in order to survive. He put forward the anti-slavery proposition by referring to the abolition of the trade in ‘abashī

³² Hairī, *Shī‘īm and Constitutionalism*, 27.

³³ Firaydūn Ādamīyat, *Andīshiha-yi Mīrzā Fat‘alī Akhūndzādah* (Tihārān: Khāurazmī, 1349), 157.

³⁴ Hairī, *Shī‘īm and Constitutionalism*, 37.

³⁵ Hairī, *Shī‘īm and Constitutionalism*, 38–43.

³⁶ Toledano, “Ottoman Concepts of Slavery in the Period of Reform,” 48.

³⁷ *Rasā’il Mashru‘īyat*, ann. Ghulāmrizā Zargarī Nijād (Tihārān: Kavīr, 1374), 304.

ghulāms and *kanīzes*.³⁸ In 1909, Mīrzā Hidāyatullāh ‘Allāhābādī, who was in favour of the *Mashru‘īyat*, condemned the situation that compelled the inhabitants of Quchān to sell their children and wives to the Turkomans in order to pay their taxes.³⁹ He himself witnessed that injustice had forced a peasant family to sell their three-year-old daughter to a Turkoman for T7 in order to pay state-imposed taxes.⁴⁰

The establishment of the parliament provided an opportunity for its members to act against slavery. “In Europe, the trade in *ghulām* and *kanīz* is abolished, why does the trade in female Iranians still exist?”⁴¹ At this time slavery was condemned from both international and religious perspectives. In one of the discussions in the *Majlis*, a representative of Āzarbāyjān condemned slavery and proposed that taking Iranians into slavery was an act against Islam: “Till now, the issue of the liberation of slaves has been discussed [more than] ten times. How can we believe in Islam, [while] the Turkomans enslaved the women, whom we consider our sisters? If we are a true Muslim, we should not rest [proceed for the liberation of the slaves].”⁴² One of the representatives, who was the congregational Imam, stated that whoever sells a Muslim must be punished immediately.⁴³ Other contributors, such as Āqā Shaykh Mu‘ammad ‘Alī and Āqā Sayyid Mu‘ammad Ja‘far, also condemned the selling of Muslims: “buyers and sellers [of slaves] are [like] beasts [meaning the worst people] even inferior than a beast, and something should be written [law] that if from now on anyone does this act [buying and selling of slaves] they will be punished”.⁴⁴

³⁸ *Rasā’il Mashru‘īyat*, 339–348.

³⁹ *Rasā’il Mashru‘īyat*, 435.

⁴⁰ *Rasā’il Mashru‘īyat*, 434.

⁴¹ *Majlis*, 6 Mu‘arram 1325.

⁴² *Majlis*, 13 Rabī‘ al-Awwal 1325.

⁴³ *Majlis*, 19 Jamadī al-Thānī 1325.

⁴⁴ *Majlis*, Rabī‘ al-Thānī 1326.

The 1848 royal *farmān* affected all levels of the country including the Bābī movement.⁴⁵ In 1873, Mīrzā Qusayn ‘Alī (1817–92), known as Bahā’u’llāh (Glory of God), the half-brother of Bāb and leader of the Bahā’ī movement, proclaimed the abolition of slavery: “Selling and buying female and male slaves is prohibited.”⁴⁶ Bahā’u’llāh, in his letter to the Queen of England, praised her for forbidding the trade in slaves. This attitude toward slavery can be interpreted as a result of “cultural interference”. Iranian elites were influenced by Western ideas, in particular on the issue of slavery.⁴⁷ Bahā’u’llāh’s eldest son and successor, ‘Abbās Effendi, known as ‘Abdulbahā, who took over the leadership of the movement from 1892 to 1921, also considered the liberation of Africans as a gift given by the whites:

The great proclamation of liberty and emancipation from slavery was made upon this continent. A long bloody war was fought by white men for the sake of colored people. These white men forfeited their possessions and sacrificed their lives by thousands in order that colored men might be freed from bondage. The colored population of the United States of America are possibly not fully informed of the wide-reaching effect of this freedom and emancipation upon their colored brethren in Asia and Africa where even more terrible conditions of slavery existed, influenced and impelled by the example of the United States, the European powers proclaimed universal liberty to the colored race and slavery ceased to exist. Both races should rejoice in gratitude, for the institution of liberty and equality here became the cause of liberating your fellow-beings elsewhere.⁴⁸

In this statement, race is the focal point, and the emphasis is put on the emancipation of coloured people of Africa. However, many white people -- including Iranians -- were also

⁴⁵ The followers of the Bābī movement came under severe attack and persecution after 1852 but continued their social and messianic practices. See Lambton, *Qajar Persia*, 104.

⁴⁶ Bahā’u’llāh, *The Kitāb-i-Aqdās* (Pakistan, Bāhā’ī, 1997), 68; for further information on Bābīsm, see Peter Smith, *The Babi and Baha’I Religions from Messianic Shi’ism to a World Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

⁴⁷ See J. T. Bent, “Village Life in Persia,” *New Review*, 5 (1891), 357.

⁴⁸ Bahā’u’llāh and ‘Abdu’l-bahā, *Bahā’i World Faith*, 269.

subjected to slavery. In a letter to the Queen of England regarding propagating the Bahā'ī rituals, 'Abdulbahā stated, "We have known that you have prohibited the selling of slave boys and girls; this is what God has commanded in this unique epiphany (al-*uhūr al-badī'*)... We have [also] heard that you have placed the supervision of consultation into the hands of the general public; well done!"⁴⁹

Ājjī Mīrzā Āqāsī⁵⁰ was Muḥammad Shāh's Prime Minister for a period of 14 years.⁵¹ Muḥammad Shāh and Ājjī Mīrzā Āqāsī, two important Qājārs, were both adherents of the *ūfī* Ni'matullāhī order. Ājjī Mīrzā Āqāsī was Muḥammad Shāh's *murshid* (master), mentor and minister. Ājjī Mīrzā Āqāsī's impact on Muḥammad Shāh resulted in a growth in the influence of *ūfī*sm in Iran.⁵²

The correspondence between Ājjī Mīrzā Āqāsī and Justin Sheil, the British official, illustrates that the former advocated the abolition of the slave trade, a reform which only could be implemented by order of the Shāh.⁵³ Ājjī did not fail to encourage the Shāh to issue an abolitionist *farmān* that did not infringe on the principles of Islam.

The 1848 *farmān* by Muḥammad Shāh was perceived as a political and social reform rather than a religious exercise. While it does not seem that at this time *ūfī* doctrine was explicitly against slavery, the reformist practices of the *ūfī* policy makers in 1848 set the stage for further anti-slavery measures. In fact, they introduced tendencies that both moderated some established traditions and prepared the ground for the eventual abolition of slavery.

⁴⁹ Hairi, *Shī'ism and Constitutionalism*, 71.

⁵⁰ He studied under Mullā 'Abdulsamad Hamidānī, one of the prominent *ūfīs* who was the follower of Mīrzā Muḥammad 'Alī Nur 'Alī Shāh I *ūfīhānī* a celebrated Ni'matullāhīya *ūfī*. *usayn Sa'adat Nurī*, Ājjī Mīrzā Āqāsī, Yaghmā, 16/5, 1342, 231.

⁵¹ 'Abdul Rafī' *aqīqat*, *Vazīrān-i Īrānī: az Buzurgmihr tā Āmīr Kabīr* (Tihārān: Koshish, 1374), 387.

⁵² Amanat, *Resurrection and Renewal*, 20.

The Qur'ān did not prohibit slavery, but restricted it. Enslavement had to meet certain criteria in order to be legal. One important aspect of the Islamic law concerning slavery related to the mode of enslavement, which could only be through *jiqād*. If slaves were taken in non-Islamic wars whose purpose was only for conquest, the captives were not recognized as slaves even if they were *kāfar* (infidel).⁵⁴

In the early twentieth century, it was clear that the sources of slavery did not meet the criteria set out in the sharī'a. Most slaves were either kidnapped or sold by their parents -- both illegal acts under Islamic law. Based on these observations, slavery was prohibited by the Ni'matullāhī qūfī order. Several *fatwās* were issued by qāj Mullā 'Alī Nur 'Alī Shāh Sānī (1867–1918), the leader and master of Gunābādī, a sub-order of the Ni'matullāhī qūfī order. One of the most significant was the February 1914 *fatwā* prohibiting slavery: "Nowadays, buying and selling of human beings is contrary to the religion and civilization, and all male and female slaves are free."⁵⁵ This was the first *fatwā* by qūfīs that explicitly condemned slavery.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, when the importation of African slaves to Iran ended, the export of Iranians from Baluchistān in the south and Khurāsān in the north to markets in neighbouring countries increased. The issue of the enslavement of Iranians turned out to be a serious internal matter. The Shī'ite 'ulamā of southern Iran were gravely concerned about the enslavement of Muslim Iranians by the Sunnī Arabs. Many enslaved Baluchīs were free

⁵³ Sheil to Palmerston, 23 February 1847, FO 84/692.

⁵⁴ Sulqān qusayn Tābanda Gunābādī, *Naqar-i Madhhabī bi I'lāmī'a-yi quq-i Bashār* (Tīhrān: Pīrūz, 1354), 45-46.

⁵⁵ Tābanda Gunābādī, *Naqar-i Madhhabī*, 51. In other Muslim societies similar reasoning was also used to end slavery. For example, in November 1962 Prince Faisal, the Prime Minister of Saudi Arabia, issued a decree to end slavery: "Any slavery existing at the present time fails to fulfill many of the Shari'a conditions laid down by Islam for slavery." See John Laffin, *The Arabs as Master Slavers* (Englewood: SBS, 1982) 71.

citizens who were kidnapped in the interior and then brought to Iranian ports, where they were embarked and shipped to Arab countries such as Oman and Saudi Arabia. In 1921, Qājī sayyid Ja'far, the judge of the *shar'* court, wrote a letter to Qisām al-Sādāt, the governor of the Lingah port, asking for an end to the disorder and insecurity that had facilitated the enslavement of southern Iranians.⁵⁶ The Shī'ite 'ulamā protested that the negligence of local governors had significantly contributed to the disorder and chaos in the southern regions and had enabled the slave trade to continue.⁵⁷ The Iranian government was alerted that slavery was being practiced throughout the province of Baluchistān and the southern region. They were aware that this issue could increase tensions between the Sunnī Arabs and the Shī'ite Iranians. In the north and northeast, many Iranians were enslaved as a result of Turkoman invasion. Inhabitants of these regions were vulnerable to Turkoman attack because of the weakness and incompetence of the central government. The need to impose a central command -- as well as to stop further Turkoman raids -- led to campaigns of Qājārs against Turkomans.⁵⁸

The policy of Iran was to act independently. It proceeded to put a total ban on slavery without the interference of foreign forces. In 1927, the Ministry of the Interior announced that Iran was committed to international agreements banning the trade in slaves.⁵⁹ The minister stated that slaves were imported to Iranian ports. Therefore, he proposed the ratification of a law against slave dealers. Rizā Shāh ordered the head of the government to propose a bill to the *Majlis-i Shurā-yi Millī* (National Consultative Assembly) for the punishment of slave traders. In

⁵⁶ Qājī sayyid Ja'far to Qisām al-Salāna, MAAB5T403, SAM.

⁵⁷ The Minister of the Interior, the Southern Ports, MAAB5T403, SAM.

⁵⁸ Lisān al-Mulk, *Nāsikh al-Tawārīkh*, II, 682–690; Astarābād is in the southwest of Khawrazm and Marv in the southeast.

⁵⁹ In 1904, 1910 and 1921, Iran signed international agreements on the prohibition of the trade in women and children, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 242FA1d1, 12/12/1323, SAM. Iran was one of

February 1928, the Justice Minister submitted the bill to parliament, which was ratified the same day.⁶⁰ This decree not only abolished the trade in slaves and slavery, but also emancipated slaves. The decree stated,

In the country of Iran, nobody is recognized as a slave. Each slave who enters Iranian territory, whether by land or by sea, will immediately be freed. Every person who sells or buys men or manifests rights over another person, or plays a role in trading or transporting in slaves, will be condemned to one to three years in jail.

Note - as soon as the government officials are informed that a person has been traded or enslaved, it is their responsibility to free them, prosecute the offender, and inform the closest public prosecutor's office.⁶¹

In contrast to previous anti-slave trade legislation, the British did not play any role in promoting the 1928 decree. In the same year, orders were sent to the governor of Iḳfihān to punish offenders and implement the state orders.⁶² It was indicated that the inhabitants of that city and surrounding areas should be informed of the governmental act ending slavery.⁶³

The policy of the central government reduced the power of provincial governors -- especially in regions where the slave trade was most practiced. The state's surveillance and the dispatch of military forces to the northern and southern regions alerted slave dealers to the risk of continuing their trade. Thus by the end of nineteenth century, no pro-slavery attitudes could be heard, and the end of the institution of slavery became apparent. When the central authority

the 36 signatories of the 1926 Slavery Convention at Geneva. See Suzanne Miers, *Slavery in the Twentieth Century* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 2003), 128–130.

⁶⁰ Rā'īn, *Daryānavardī-yi Īrānīān*, 706–710.

⁶¹ The Ministry of the Interior, 290, 11/384/3, SAM.

⁶² The Minister of the Interior, the South Office, to the Government of Iḳfihān, 25/12/1307, 291/10/109/2, SAM.

⁶³ The Ministry of the Interior, the government of port and Islands of the Persian Gulf and Dashtī and Dashtistān, 16/6/1310, 290/11/384/1, SAM.

acquired more power in the twentieth century, the frontiers of south and north became secured, the kidnapping of Iranians and the smuggling of Africans almost ended and slavery became illegal. Smuggling slaves from India and Africa to Iran and kidnapping and enslaving Iranians caused the state to act against these practices. The importation of slaves by land remained legal until 1928, when Rizā Shāh issued a *farmān* prohibiting the slave trade by both sea and land and parliament ratified a bill declaring the unconditional emancipation of slaves.