
BABAK -E- KHORRAMDIN

Fariborz Rahnmoon

Babak Khorramdin was one of the Persian leaders of the national resistance against the invading Muslim Arabs. He is known as the 'Sorkh Jamegan'. They were the combative Freedom Fighters symbolised by the colour red, while the 'Seya Jamegan' symbolised by the colour black were the ones that entered politics and fought from within the Arab administration, like Abu Moslem Khorasani whose real name was 'Behzadan pour Vandad Hormoz'. The black face and the red robe of Haji Phiroz who dances and sings on Now Ruz are symbolic of these two forces while commemorating Phiroze Nahavandi who killed Omar the second Khalifa.

Babak's date of birth is not known but he started his campaigns in 816 CE in the reign of the Abbassi Khalifa Mamun and was executed in January of 838 CE by the Khalifa Motasem. He fought the Arabs for 21 long years and was a thorn in their eyes, as such he has been villanized with sarcasm and hostility by Arab writers and historians. His mother Mahru has been called 'one-eyed' his father Mehrdas a vagabond and Babak himself a drug addict and an illegitimate child. These are some of the profanities commonly used by the Arabs between themselves. That what is important is what Babak did and achieve, for which he is today remembered and is immortalized (Amordad) as a National Hero.

Bābak who saw the atrocities committed by the Arabs against his people incited his followers to rise in rebellion against the Khalifa and the Arabs. The reports state that Bābak called men to arms, seized castles and strategic points. Long before Babak, there were resistance groups scattered in Isfahan, Azerbaijan, Ray, Hamadān, Armenia, Gorgān, and elsewhere, and there had been some earlier revolts, e.g., in Gorgān under the Red Banner (Sorkh-alamān) Bātenīs in Khalifa Mahdī's reign in 778-79 CE when 'Amr b. Alā', the governor of Ṭabarestān, was ordered to repulse them, and at Isfahan, Ray, Hamadān, and elsewhere in Hārūn al-Rašhīd's realm, when 'Abd-Allāh b. Mālek and Abū Dolaf 'Ejlī put them down on the Khalifa's behalf; ¹ but none was of the scale and duration of Bābak's revolt, which pinned down the Khalifa's armies for twenty years.

Babak Khoramdin established his base in Azarbaijan and nationalists from everywhere joined him. His army has been reported to have ranged from 100 to 200 thousand people which is an exaggeration to cover up for their failure against Babak and his men.

Babak has also been affiliated with various religious and social movements by various historians but again his deeds and achievements are what is important. He fought against two Khalifas and scores of Arab commanders and governors who either lost their lives in the fight or were replaced by the Khalifa for incompetence. Babak had set up headquarters in the safety of the mountains castles with deep ravines and narrow passes from where a handful of fighters could dislodge and defeat an entire Arab army. He and his followers would venture out to attack the enemy and return to the safety of these castles.

The Abbasi Khalifah Al-Mamun who died in his campaign against the Byzantine in 833 CE advised in his testimony to his successor Al-Motasem, to spare no effort or resources in crushing

Babak. Motasem like his predecessor was kept busy by Babak who continued his campaigns against the Arabs. Then Motasem engaged a Persian ruler [Keydar b. Kāvūs Afšīn](#), who had submitted to Islam to be able to keep his territory in Khorasan under his control. He was a commander and helped the Arabs in their campaign in Egypt. Motasem appointed him as the governor of Azerbaijan and paid Afshin lavishly, especially when on a campaign.

Afshīn arrived in Azerbaijan and rebuilt the fortresses between Barjānd and Ardabīl destroyed by Bābak. He then gave battle to Bābak at Arshaq, defeated him, and drove him into Mūgān and then back into his fortress of Badd, although one of Bābak's commanders, Ṭarḳān or Ādīn, managed to defeat at Haštādsar a force under the Khalifah's general Boḡā al-Kabīr (836CE) which included Afshīn's brother Faẓl b. Kāvūs, who had also entered the khalifa's service. In this same year, Afshīn received reinforcements from the Khalifa under Ja'far b. al-Ḳayyāṭ and a contingent of volunteers under the Arab magnate Abū Dolaf Ejlī. Afshīn now established a camp at Rūd-al-rūd about six miles away from Baḡḡ and used this as a base for the assaults by his mountain troops.

A large sum of money was being sent by Khalifa Motasem to pay for the troops. Afshīn who had captured some of Babak's spies lets them escape with this information knowing well that Babak would attack the caravan, he sets up a trap, in which many of Bābak's comrades were killed. Bābak himself got away to the Mūgān plain and thence to Baḡḡ.²

After an abortive attack by Abū Dolaf's volunteers, Afshīn brought up siege machinery and naphtha-throwers, and finally stormed Badd in August, 837. Babak seeing that he was under siege, negotiated with Afshin for safe conduct but Afshin's troops had in the meantime scaled the walls and were fighting inside the castle. Babak and many of his men managed to escape through secret passages.³

Afshin, who had already dispatched a request to the Kalifah for safe conduct for Bābak, learned from spies that Bābak and his party were hiding in a forest-covered valley on the Azerbaijan-Armenian border, and he proceeded to blockade the area. When the Khalifah's safe conduct arrived, Afshīn commissioned two Ḳorramīs to carry it to Bābak together with a letter from Bābak's son, who had been taken, prisoner. Bābak rejected the document without opening it, and after sending the messengers away fled towards Armenia with four or five male and female members of his family and one bodyguard. Except for Bābak his brother and the guard all the others were captured. Babak sought refuge with the local Armenian ruler, Sahl b. Sonbāṭ but Afshin had already promised a huge reward to Sahl if he helped in his capture. So he informs Afshin and arranges to take Babak on a hunting trip. Afshin sends a large force and Babak is captured put in a chain and taken to Afshin on 15 September 837 CE.⁴

Babak was kept prisoner by Afshin but treated comparatively well, some of his complaints were entertained. He once asked for a guard to be replaced because the guard did not wash his hands after eating meat and had a bad smell coming from him that bothered Babak. Afshin most probably realised that his action will not be seen favourably in history and did not rush to deliver Babak to Motasem at his headquarter in Samara. Finally, when he was ordered to deliver Babak he asked him if he wished to do anything in Azarbaijan before leaving. To which Babak answered, "I long to see my town again." So Afshin sent an escort of men with him on a moonlit night to Badd, and Babak roamed around in it and looked at the slain and the houses until dawn then the escort brought him back to Afshin.⁵

It was on 4 January, 838 CE that Babak reached Samarra in Iraq. He was lodged in the palace allotted to Afshin at al-Matirah which was located two miles south of Samarra and was a pleasure ground for Baghdad and Samarra. He was a legend who had intrigued the Arabs for two decades and everyone wanted to see him. Motasem sent his deputies who came in disguise and talked to Babak and went back and reported. Finally, Motasem went into Babak's presence disguised, and scrutinized him at length, without Babak recognizing him.⁶

The next morning al-Motasem sat in state to receive Babak. The troops were drawn up in lines (along the road) from the Bab al-Ammah to al-Matirah, and al-Motasem wished to display Babak publicly and show him to the populace at large. He, therefore, asked, "On what sort of mount should this fellow be placed, and how can he best be shown off?" Hizam (a Khorassanian) told him, "O Commander of the Faithful, there is nothing better for displaying (someone) than on an elephant!" Al-Motasem commented, "You have spoken truly," and ordered the elephant to be gotten ready. He gave further orders concerning Babak, and he was dressed in a short coat of satin brocade and a round cap of sable fur; he was completely alone.

The people watched Babak intently from al-Matirah to the Bab al-'Ammah, and then he was brought into the Public Audience Chamber (*Dar al Ammah*) before the Commander of the Faithful. The latter summoned a butcher to cut off his hands and feet. But then he ordered instead Babak's executioner to be brought in, so the chamberlain went out by the Bab al-'Ammah, at the same time calling out "Nudnud!" -this being the name of Babak's executioner and the cry of "Nudnud!" rose until he appeared. He came into the Public Audience Chamber, and the Commander of the Faithful ordered him to cut off Babak's hands and feet.⁷

When one of Bābak's hands had been cut off, he made his face red by smearing blood on it with his other hand, and when al-Motasem asked why, he answered that it was because the loss of blood causes pallor and he did not want him to suppose that he was pale with fear. Then the Commander of the Faithful ordered him to be slaughtered. Then he sent Babak's head to Khorasan and gibbeted his trunk in Samarra at al-Aqaba.

The post in Samarra on which Babak's corpse was gibbeted was still known for this more than thirty years later, as appears in the writings of Abu al-Faraj al-Isfahani. Aghdni, says that the spot was still known as *Khashabat Babak* in his own time, a century later, when Samarra was much reduced in population.⁸

The total number of Arabs whom Babak killed in twenty years is estimated by Tabari to be about 255,000 and he defeated governors and commanders like Yahya b. Muadh, `Isa b. Muhammad b. Abi Khalid, Ahmad b. al-Junayd (whom he took prisoner), Zurayq b. Ali b. Sadaqah, Muhammad b. Humayd al-Tusi, and Ibrahim b. al-Layth.

Al-Motasem presented al-Afshin with a crown, girded him with two jewelled belts and presented him with 20 million dirhams, 10 million of which he kept as a personal gift and the other 10 million of which he was to distribute among his troops. Al-Motasem appointed him governor of Sind, and he had poets brought in to praise him and ordered presents for them.⁹

Today Babak Khoramdin is commemorated as a National Hero while Afshin is the accursed traitor. Babak's mountain top castle is a national monument and part of the way is paved to make it accessible to those that cherish his memory.



Babak's Castle



¹ *Sāsāt-nāma*, pp. 359-60; *Faṣīh*, I, pp. 230-31; cf. Madelung, p. 64; Amoretti, pp. 504-05 and Iranicaonline.org

² Ṭabarī, 32, p. 1174-78 and Iranicaonline.org

³ Ṭabarī, Vol 33, p. 1215

⁴ Tabari Vol 33 p. 1228

⁵ Tabari Vol 33 p 1228

⁶ Tabari Vol 33 p 1230

⁷ Tabari Vol 33 p 1231

⁸ XXI, ed. Brunnow, 258, *Shajarat Babak*; Mas'udi, Muruj, VII, 131 = par. 2813,

⁹ Tabari Vol 33 p 1233