Mirza Kuchik Khan and the Jangali Movement

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Introduction

The topic of peasant involvement in protest movements, uprisings, rebellions, and revolutions has remained an important concern for many scholars of the Third World. What has made the Jangali movement in Iran (1915–21) particularly interesting is not simply the involvement of peasants in the rebellion that engulfed the very important Caspian littoral province of Gilan. It is rather in the movement’s ability to forge unlikely coalitions between rural and urban groups as well as its success in creating an unholy alliance of nationalists, leftists, and communists, and incorporating religious elements. Furthermore, connections with foreign powers and the presence of non-Iranians in the leadership circle gave an international posture to the group and raised a host of questions about them. Very importantly, the towering figure of Mirza Kuchik Khan, the movement’s leader and his aspirations for national leadership added yet another dimension to the Jangalis.

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1Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the Eleventh Hamid Enayat Lecture at St. Anthony’s College, Oxford University and at Columbia University’s Faculty Seminar on Iran, which was chaired by Dr. Ehsan Yarshater.

2See Farhad Kazemi and Ervand Abrahamian, “The Nonrevolutionary Peasantry of Modern Iran,” Iranian Studies 11 (1978): 259–304; and Farhad Kazemi, “Peasant Uprisings in Twentieth-Century Iran, Iraq, and Turkey,” in
Since the Islamic Revolution, the Jangali movement has acquired a very special notoriety in Iran. A large number of books and articles have been written about them. Several memoirs of the movement’s leadership circle have been published. Their newspaper, Jangal, has been reprinted and stamps honoring Mirza Kuchik Khan have been issued. Other commemorations, including a ten-part television series, have given wide publicity to the Jangalis and their movement. Both the Left and the Right, even the center, have come to claim Mirza Kuchik Khan as one of their own. What follows is an overview account of the Jangalis, Mirza Kuchik Khan’s personality, and the movement’s ideology and organizational structure.

Mirza Kuchik Khan

Mirza Unes Rashti, known as Mirza Kuchik Khan (son of Mirza Bozorg), was born in 1881 in a middle class Gilani family residing in the area of Rasht. His early years were spent in two schools studying grammar and religious subjects. He then went to Tehran and studied religious sciences at the Mahmudiyeh School. His plans were apparently to become a Mujtahid. But this was not to be. As his biographer, Ibrahim Fakhra’i points out: “The turmoil and events of the country changed the course of his thoughts; he exchanged his turban, cloak, and clog for guns, ammunition, and hand grenades.” His religious faith, however, remained strong to the end and he performed regularly all his religious duties, including prayers, fasting, and other obligations. He was a well-built, powerful, and handsome man with green eyes, a smiling face, a long forehead, and muscular arms.

Kuchik was known among his fellow students as a bright and unusual person who stood for fairness and justice. He apparently loved sports and athletics. He avoided alcohol and opium (which was plentiful at the time in Iran). He was apparently totally committed to divination. Whenever a difficulty or any doubts arose about any issue, he would immediately turn to divination using his ever-present worry


beads. He would always abide by the results of the divination. This applied to all critical decisions, including decisions about warfare. It is reported that on several occasions Ehsanollah Khan, one of Kuchik’s close followers, said to another ally, Dr. Heshmat, that “after we are gone, the number one hero of this movement will be none other than Mirza Kuchik Khan’s rosary.” In a famous picture of the Revolution Committee, Kuchik’s large rosary is placed on a small table alongside the Red Guard revolutionary leaders from the Soviet Union.

According to Fakhra’i, because of his native shyness and shame (hojb va haya), Kuchik did not want to get married. He only married toward the end of his life. There are different stories about his wife and whether or not she was an active fighter for his cause. As with all revolutionary leaders who became legend after death, there remain many tales about Kuchik, his personality and character. In one story, apparently told by Kuchik himself, he was in Tehran during the time that the Mojahedin were trying to get rid of Mohammad Ali Shah Qajar, helping them in their efforts. He was, however, upset by some of their actions and severed his ties with them. He was consequently living in Tehran without any money and destitute. He relates that

One day I was very upset at the turn of events and worried about Iran’s future. As I was walking in the street, a beggar saw me and asked for a hand-out. I had no money and was poorer than the beggar (darih jibam ra tar ankabut gerefteh bud), as they say (bakhiyeh be ab dugh mizadam). But the beggar would not give up and continued to follow and pressure me. I did not have a penny but the persistent (semej) beggar would not let me go and continued to follow and pester me. Eventually I lost my patience and slapped him in the face. As if waiting for this strike, the beggar fell down and died instantly. I was very upset and knew that I deserved punishment. So I went to the police and gave myself up as a murderer. The chief of police, Yaphrum, was very surprised by my honesty and fortitude. But I was put in jail for a long time until, eventually, with the forgiveness of the family of injured party, I was released from jail.

Kuchik and the Jangalis all looked fierce with their long hair, elaborate mustaches, and bushy beards. According to some sources, this style was based on a collective

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8 Fakhra’i, Sardar-i Jangal, 36–37.
9 Fakhra’i, Sardar-i Jangal, 42.
decision that they would not shave or shorten their hair until their goals were reached and all foreign forces were out of Iran. This objective was at least partly based on the religious concept of nazr kardan, a common practice among Shi’ites and other Muslims. However, after the movement’s initial success and after trained officers (Turks, Iranians, and Germans) joined their ranks, the appearance of many Jangalis (but not Kuchik and some of his close associates) also changed. At this time, it was not unusual to see Jangali forces in proper and official military uniforms.

But the legend of long-haired and wild-eyed Jangalis remained strong and alive. Their hard looks made them appear as historical and legendary figures and even helped create an image of fear. In fact, it is alleged that some of the common folks of Gilan thought that Mirza Kuchik Khan was the hidden Imam who had now appeared from his Great Occultation. Sir Percy Sykes, in volume 2 of A History of Persia, maintains that the term Jangali was bestowed on the party by others and as a derogatory term in contempt.\(^\text{10}\) The depiction of Jangalis as uncivilized forest dwellers versus civilized urban residents is not accurate. At least this is not how they were viewed at the time. Many Gilan residents revered Kuchik and his crowd and paid them immense respect.

The Movement

The rise and development of the Jangali movement was in part helped by the Gilan peasants and the peculiarities of Iranian agriculture. “The Iranian agrarian structure operated on the basis of five distinctive classes composed of absentee landlords (which included state, waqf, and large and small landowners), rich peasants, middle peasants, sharecroppers with cultivation rights, and poor peasants who neither owned land nor enjoyed the rights of cultivation.”\(^\text{11}\) There is no precise information on the relative size of these groups. Historically, however, the tendency in Iran has been progression toward large landownership.\(^\text{12}\)

The large landowners found numerous ways to increase their holding since it was an essential source of economic security. The rising numbers of poor peasants paid the price for their increasing dependency on the absentee landlord for survival. Gilan


\(^{11}\)Kazemi, “Peasant Uprisings,” 116–18. Please note that I have freely used some of my previously published material in this article.

province also enjoyed a somewhat larger size of the middle peasantry than the rest of the country. Middle peasants (smallholders who use family labor to cultivate their land) always fear the loss of their small holdings. The fact of ownership, however, gives them some autonomy from the landlords’ full control. This tactical freedom has historically provided the impetus for the middle peasants to get involved in rural uprisings in the hope of solidifying their land ownership. Other factors also helped give rise to peasant support and solidarity for the movement. These include the weakness of the central government, Gilan’s ethnic homogeneity, the absence of settled tribes, greater advancement in the market economy, and the pace of agricultural commercialization. The combination of these factors provided Mirza Kuchik Khan a base of support among the peasants and solidified his rebellion.

The Jangali movement began in the early years of World War I as Russian and British troops occupied the main cities of Iran. The movement was led by a dynamic preacher named Mirza Kuchik Khan. He had been an armed volunteer in the Constitutional Revolution and had joined the pro-clerical Moderate Party in 1909 in opposition to the secular Democratic Party. At the outbreak of the World War I, Kuchik established contacts with officials of the Ottoman Empire, formed the Committee of Islamic Unity, and, with weapons obtained from German and Turkish agents, led an armed band into the forests of Gilan to wage guerrilla war against the Russians. He was soon joined by two other groups. The first, headed by a minor Kurdish chief named Kahlo Qorbanat, consisted of Kurds who had been forced out of Kermanshah after an unsuccessful military campaign against the British. The second, formed by Democrats from Tehran, was led by Ehsanollah Khan, a young intellectual who


had been influenced by revolutionary political thought, especially anarchism, while studying law in Paris.

These three groups, despite their differences, managed to work together against the occupying armies. They harassed the Russian and British troops, published a clandestine paper called Jangal, and arrested government officials suspected of collaborating with the foreigners. Moreover, they consciously tried to build a popular base among the rural population. They increased the sharecropper’s portion of the harvest, lightened labor services, abolished dues in kind, investigated complaints against landowners, recruited peasants into their bands, paid for the food they obtained in the villages, and even forced wealthy collaborators to distribute some of their estates among the peasantry. They confiscated property of some large landowners, distributed it among peasants in the neighboring area, and levied taxes on landowners’ produce.

The Jangalis were strengthened further by the collapse of the Tsarist Regime. As the Russian armies disintegrated, the rebels assumed control over much of Gilan, including Rasht and Enzeli, obtained additional weapons, and recruited more local volunteers. Moreover, while the Red Army chased the remnants of the White Army into the Caspian provinces, the rebels found new allies in the recently formed Communist Party of Iran. Transferring its headquarters from Baku to Gilan, the Communist Party reinforced the Jangalis with their own armed volunteers, most of whom were Azeri-speaking Iranians, both intellectuals and oil workers, residing in the Caucasus. The party was headed by Haydar Khan Amu-Ogli, a Tiflis-educated electrical engineer who had joined the Russian Social Democratic Party, fought in the Constitutional Revolution in Iran, and helped organize the Democrat Party in Tehran.\footnote{See Alireza Sheikholeslami, “Haydar Khan Amu-Ogli,” \textit{Encyclopedia Iranica} XII, 69–70. Isma’il Ra’în, Haydar Khan Amu-Ogli (Tehran: Intesharat-i Ra’în, 1973).} Allying with the Communists, the Jangalis declared the formation of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Gilan in June 1920.\footnote{See Chaqueri, \textit{Soviet Socialist Republic of Iran}, for details on the Gilan Republic. Also see Stephanie Cronin, \textit{Tribal Politics in Iran: Rural Conflict and the New State}, 1921-1941 (London: Routledge, 2007), esp. pp. 16-39.\footnote{See Girgor Yaqikian, \textit{Shoravi va Jombeh-e Jangal: Yaddashtha-i Yek Shahed-i ‘Eini} (Tehran: Novin, 1984).} The new republic was headed by a coalition cabinet of Democrats, Communists, and local Muslim leaders. Meanwhile, its expanding army of some 1500 guerrillas was commanded by Mirza Kuchik Khan, Ehsanollah Khan, Khalu Qorban, and Communist representatives.\footnote{17}
Internal contradictions soon broke apart the united front. While the Communists called for the immediate distribution of land, Kuchik and his religious supporters talked of the sanctity of private property. While the Communists initiated an anti-clerical campaign and championed the rights of women, Kuchik declared that “principles, not weapons, generate political movements. In the past, the principles that have generated meaningful political movements in Iran have been those of Sacred Islam.”

These differences came to a head after February 1921, when Colonel Reza Khan of the Cossack Brigade, the future Reza Shah Pahlavi of Iran, overthrew the government in Tehran, denounced former agreements with Britain, signed a pact with the Russian Bolsheviks, negotiated the evacuation of the Red Army, and extended the hand of friendship to all patriotic and progressive groups in Iran. The Communists and many of the Democrats, convinced by the Soviet-Iranian Treaty, were willing to accept this hand of friendship. But Kuchik Khan, distrustful of the Cossack officers, foreign intentions, and Tehran politicians, refused to negotiate with the new government. Suspecting double dealing, Kuchik Khan murdered Haydar Khan, tried to murder Khalu Qorban, and forced Ehsanollah Khan to evacuate with the Red Army. Left without allies and confronted with an expeditionary force from Tehran, Kuchik Khan retreated to the snow-covered mountains of Gilan where he froze to death during the bitter winter of 1921. By December 1921, Kuchik Khan’s head was on public display in Rasht to prove to all that the Jangali movement had ended and to preempt future rebels from taking on the dead hero’s cause.

Although Kuchik Khan failed to appear, the Jangali movement revived briefly during World War II. With the weakening of the central government, survivors from the earlier movement regrouped under the name the Jangali Party. They demanded the convening of provincial assemblies, elimination of court influences in politics, and distribution of crown and state lands among the peasantry. Moreover, they formed the Farmer’s Association and allied with the Tudeh Party and its Peasant Union. By 1945 the local branch of the Communist Tudeh Party, together with the Jangali Party, controlled much of Gilan and the adjacent districts of Mazandaran. While their trade union dominated the towns, their peasant organizations and armed

18See newspapers Donya, January 7, 14, and 13, 1945; and Gileh Mard, May 10, 1946.
militias controlled the countryside, setting up roadblocks, imposing fines on landlords, and successfully encouraging sharecroppers not to give up any share of the harvest. This situation continued until after the end of World War II, when Soviet troops evacuated the region, allowing the Iranian army to reassert central authority.

After the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, the Jangalins were once again rehabilitated. The government praised the Jangalins’ Islamic orientation and their fight against the oppressors. It republished Jangal, issued a commemorative stamp honoring Kuchik Khan, and held a memorial marking the sixty-ninth year of his “‘martyrdom.’” The minister of culture and Islamic guidance, a cleric, praised Mirza Kuchik Khan for his “Islamic nationalist” uprising and for his attempt to “rescue the people in the name of of Islam and under the protection of religion.” A ten-part series on Iranian television featuring Kuchik Khan’s “struggles with Tsarist Cossacks and Victorian lackeys,” was also widely shown.

**Organization and Structure**

The Jangalins’ organization and structure evolved in response to the demands of the moment and the circumstances of their lives. Much of the Jangalins’ time was devoted to either armed combat with local and foreign forces or to disputes (including armed disputes) among themselves. There was not much opportunity, with the exception of the brief period when they ruled Rasht, to put into operation a governmental organization and structure. Broadly speaking, their organization was composed of military units headed by Kuchik. They had also established a training school for lower-level officers in Gharb-i Zarmakh, which was directed by a German officer (Major von Paschen) and assisted by several officers from Germany and Austria. Other administrative units were organized around central critical topics. These included finance, internal affairs, health, judiciary, fabric- and cloth-making factories, and others.

At their height, the Jangalins had divided the areas under their control into four basic geographic and administrative units. Each unit had an head. Kuchik was in charge of Fuman and Gilan forests, Haydar of Enzeli, Khalu Qorban of Rasht, and Ehsanollah of Lahijan. Coordination among the four top leaders was mired with problems and persistent mistrust. They were also fiercely competitive with one another.

The Jangalis’ finances came from several varied sources. They were based on Islamic ushr taxation payments, funds from local governments’ treasuries, foreign governments, and the “Robin Hood syndrome” (taking the money from the rich and distributing it to the poor). A prominent example of the latter was the kidnapping of wealthy landowner Amin al-Dowleh (husband of Fakh-a-Dowleh and father of Dr. Ali Amini who later became Iran’s prime minister in the 1960s). Amin al-Dowleh was released after the family paid some 70,000 tumans in cash.

**Ideology**

The Jangali movement was not a sophisticated organization with elaborate ideological positions. Its basic ideological stance was simple and pure: expulsion of foreign forces, establishment of public safety, elimination of injustice, and struggle against dictatorship. These views were formally enshrined in their official statement of goals and aims (maramnameh) which was composed of seven principal articles dealing with government, civil laws, elections, economics, religion, justice, defense, labor, and health. This document is quite progressive by the standards of the time, although some of its provisions may strike us as naive and somewhat elementary. It declares that all individuals are deemed to be equal before the law irrespective of their religion or race. Equality of men and women in civil law and social affairs are specified. It guarantees all essential freedoms such as freedom of thought, opinion, speech, and assembly. In many respects, this document has become the critical source for judging the Jangalis main ideological thrust.

Since the Jangali movement went through three critical phases, its ideological positions are not always the same. Its first (1915–20) and last (1921) phases are probably more reflective of the above positions than their brief second phase (a few months between 1920 and 1921). The second phase corresponds to the Gilan Republic period and the union of Jangalis and Communists. Hence leftist positions dominate the Jangali ruling coalition and its propaganda. In this phase, the talk was about establishing an Iranian Red Guard military organization similar to the Soviet Union’s, disenfranchising the landowners, and promoting the welfare of urban and rural workers. It is probably not unreasonable to judge the Jangalis primarily on the basis

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of their positions in the first and third phases. The second phase was a short-lived period and soon ended with the Jangalis pitted against the leftist and pro-Soviet forces.

Broadly speaking, the Jangalis were made up of three different political constituencies and groups. First, is the main group, known as the National Revolutionary group and led by Kuchik Khan. This group had a strong base among peasants and farmers as well as important support among some city dwellers and urban progressive forces. Second, is the Reformist group, which included merchants and even some of the major landowners. This group was generally well-off financially and was willing to push for political reform until it infringed on their economic and social positions. They supported Kuchik initially but turned against him in the second and third phases of the movement. The third, the Leftist group, consisted of leftists and Communists who were for the most part attached to foreign governments and forces. This group included Ehsanollah Khan, Haydar Khan Amu-Ogli, and even Khalu Qorban, even though Khalu Qorban was not fundamentally ideological in orientation. Most but not all members of the Leftist group were all too willing to do the bidding of foreign forces.

None of the principal allies in the movement fared well in the end. Khalu Qorban gave himself up to Reza Khan and was given the rank of colonel and sent to fight the Kurdish rebel Semitqu. He was reportedly killed by the Kurdish forces. He had earlier taken the severed head of Mirza Kuchik Khan (which had been on display in Rasht) to Reza Khan. Reza Khan did not like this and rebuked and scolded Khalu Qorban. Kuchik’s severed head was then taken by the order of Reza Khan to Tehran’s Hasanabad cemetery and later removed and buried in Rasht’s Solayman-i Darab. The anniversary of Kuchik’s death is regularly held at this site, where the Gilanis mourn his death and adorn their native son’s grave with flowers.

Ehsanollah Khan went to Baku and was rumored to be in the regular payment of the Soviet government. He either died or, most likely, was killed in one of the Stalinist purges. Suspected of treachery and double dealing, Amu-Ogli was killed by the Jangalis “with or without” Kuchik’s knowledge. With the fall of Kuchik Khan and his close allies, the Jangali movement came to an official end.

23Sheikholeslami, “Haydar Khan Amu-Ogli,” 70.
The Jangali movement is an important episode in the history of modern Iran. It is a movement based on rural and peasant support that also managed to recruit urban allies. It combined nationalist zeal, religious dogma, and leftist forces. It took place in an area where both the pattern of landownership was somewhat different from the rest of the country and agricultural commercialization was more advanced. Mirza Kuchik Khan and the Jangali movement also created a legend that continues to absorb scholars and laymen alike.

The last picture of Mirza Kuchik Khan Jangali
http://i45.photobucket.com/albums/f81/Nytol/mirza56o.jpg
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