

AN ACCOUNT OF NADIR SHAH IN AN EIGHTEENTH CENTURY ARABIC MS¹

IT is a pity that so far historians of the life and reign of Nadir Shah have almost entirely neglected the Arabic sources, most of which are still in manuscript form.

Of these valuable manuscripts, Abdulla as-Suwaidi's *an-Nafhah al-Miskiyya fi'r Rihla al Makkiyyah*, dated 1160 A.H., is the most important, as it gives an eye-witness account of Nadir Shah. Suwaidi actually met and conversed with Nadir.

Owing to the fact that Suwaidi's account can be regarded as first hand information, we shall give here a close translation of the main points in it.²

“The reason for my leaving for Mecca the Revered, is my desire to escape from the clutches of the great tyrant Nadir Shah, and my success in supporting the truth and refuting falsehood.”²

The story in short, is as follows : When the Kingdom of Persia collapsed, and the Afghans seized the capital Isfahan, and the Ottomans captured some of the cities after the murder of Shah Husain, by the Afghans, his son Tahmasp determined to avenge him and remove the disgrace. He gathered round him a great number of Persians, among them being this Nadir Shah. Tahmasp was thoughtless and careless as far as the affairs of his subjects were concerned. He over-indulged himself in drinking. Nadir sought Tahmasp's friendship, becoming eventually the mainstay of his government, all Tahmasp's affairs being handed to him. Nadir began to recover all the provinces (seized by Persia's enemies), regaining first of all Isfahan from the Afghans, whom he dispersed in all directions. So he was surnamed Tahmasp Quli. The common folk, however, changed it into Tahmaz Quli, meaning the slave of Tahmasp. Henceforward, he was known by it to such an extent that his first name was almost forgotten. Turning to his campaigns, we find that he then directed his attention to the provinces seized by the Ottomans, which he regained. Advancing at the head of a huge army he intended to besiege Baghdad. The Governor at the time was the Great Vizier...³ Ahmad Pasha, the son of the late Hasan

1. British Museum Library, (Add. 18518).

2. Ibid Fol. 9/6—22/6.

3. We have omitted all the honorific titles given him,

Pasha. Now, it was not the duty of the Vizier to fight this tyrant dissenter. His was to defend the citadel. So strict was he that had his turban fallen outside the rampart, he would not have gone out to fetch it. With him were three other Ministers for protection : *Qara Mustafa Pasha*, *Sari Mustafa Pasha*, and *Hammal Oghlu Ahmad Pasha*.

The aggressor besieged Baghdad for eight months, until there was no food left. People began to eat the flesh of horses and donkeys, —nay even cats and dogs. Nevertheless, God drove him away and saved Baghdad from him, because the Ottomans mustered an army under the command of Topal Uthman Pasha. He made for Baghdad and put to flight the Persian army, including Tahmasp Quli. He defeated them, but only after a great battle. Yet after his defeat and flight, Nadir came back and laid siege to it again. The Governor was again Ahmad Pasha. God Almighty saved it from him once more. So he left for Asia Minor, making for Arz Room. God saved this from him as well. On returning to the wilderness of Maqan, the Persians proclaimed him Sultan, according to special arrangements made by him. The date of the event was embodied in the chronogram “*Al-Khayru fi ma waqa*” What happened was for the good. His opponents, however, altered it into “*La khayra fi ma waqa*” There is nothing good in what has happened. The numerical value is the same as in the previous phrase. He now made for India, exploiting that country continually until he reached its capital, Jehanabad, which he seized after a fierce battle ; afterwards he concluded a truce with its ruler, Muhammad Shah, seizing from him an unlimited amount of wealth. He imposed on Muhammad Shah an annual tribute in the form of a treasure, naming the quality and the amount to be paid. Having departed from India, he made for Turkistan, seizing Balkh and Bukhara on the way. In short, all the peoples of Afghanistan, Turkistan and Persia obeyed him. Moreover, the Persians claim that the Indians, including their ruler, Muhammad Shah, have done homage to Nadir, and that Muhammad Shah is only his viceroy. Hence he styled himself *Shahinshah* and ordered that he should be addressed as such, threatening with punishment anyone omitting to use the title. Next, he left for Daghistan, making for al-Luzk. He remained there for four years, but gained no advantage, for none of the people of al-Luzk obeyed him. Meanwhile, he did not cease sending messengers to the Ottoman court, to convey his demands for the lands extending from Ruha to Abadan, claiming it by inheritance, law and justice ; for according to him Tamerlane, whose heir he was had seized them. He also demanded the recognition of the sect he believed in, *viz.*, that of Ja‘far as-Sadiq, maintaining that the claim was a sound one, and that the Orthodox should say that the Muslim schools of theology were five instead of four and that he should have a fifth *rukn*, (quarter) in the Ka’ba, and that he should be in charge of the pilgrimage route via Zubaida’s road ; so that he could put the pools and wells, etc. in order,

and should the pilgrims choose to go via Iraq, he would appoint the Chief of the Pilgrims *Amir al-Hajj*, who would conduct the pilgrims on their journey and bring them back.

He added that he would then renounce part of his demands and insist on the rest. This continued to be his practice while he was spreading corruption in the world, until he destroyed most of the lands of Iraq. Disorder prevailed, until the year 1156 A.H. when he advanced to al-'Iraq al-'Arabi at the head of a great army. His troops were as many as there are sand grains and pebbles. He dispatched his squadrons and troops throughout the country, keeping about 70,000 for the siege of Baghdad, sending 90,000 for the siege of Basra. Both towns were besieged for six months ; although Basra was shelled, Baghdad was in no danger of this, for, thanks to the great vizier Ahmad Pasha, the Persians were kept about one parasang away from the city.

While the siege continued, Nadir Shah and the rest of his army left for *Shahr-zur*. Its people, together with the Kurdish and Arab tribes, did homage to him. Then he made for the citadel of Kirkuk, which he besieged for eight days, shelling it with twenty thousand shells, and a similar number of bombs. At last they surrendered and rendered homage to him ; so he proceeded to Arbil, whose people surrendered and promised to obey him. After this he made for Mosul, his army being about 200,000. He had two bridges erected on the Tigris for his soldiers to cross, which they did, and besieged Mosul for about forty days. In seven days he bombarded it with forty thousand shells and a similar number of bombs but they (the people of Mosul) stood firm and relegated their affairs to Almighty God. Nadir Shah later ordered the laying of mines which he filled with gunpowder and lead, and set fire to them. It turned out to be a greater catastrophe for him, than for the besieged. When it became evident that he could not conquer Mosul, he left, with his army for Baghdad, setting up his camp at the sepulchre of Musa ibn Jafar. He visited it, as well as the sepulchre of Muhammad al Jawad, then he crossed the Tigris in a canoe, to visit the Imam Abu Hanifa. His messengers kept going to and fro between him and Ahmad Pasha, until he relinquished his demands concerning the approval of the Shi'ah sect, and the belief that it was the faith of Ja'far as-Sadiq. Then he made for Najaf to visit the grave of the Imam Ali bin Abi Talib, and to see the dome which he had ordered to be built in gold.

One day, however, while I was sitting, on the Sunday evening of the 21st Shawwal, the messenger of the vizier Ahmad Pasha came to me asking me to call on him. I went after the evening prayer. Entering the Government house, I met his boon-companion and night-discourser Ahmad Agha who asked me, "Do you know why you have been asked to call?" I said: "No." "The Pasha wishes" he explained, "to send you to Nadir Shah. "What for?" I asked. "Because" he said, "he wants a scholar who will discuss with the Persian scholars the question of the Shi'ite sect and prove it baseless, when the Persians will

attempt to prove its soundness. If Ahmad Pasha is outdone he will have to admit, and believe in the Fifth Sect.

In the morning I met the Vizier Ahmad Pasha. He had a lengthy discussion with me and said, "I pray God to strengthen your argument and make your tongue fluent with truth. But you have the choice either to argue or to discontinue the argument. If you find them obstinate and unfair, tell them that you have not been commissioned by the Pasha to argue. But do not stop the discussion altogether. Put forward some incidental subjects so that the Persians will realize that you are a learned man. If, on the other hand, you find them fair and anxious to discover the truth, then argue with them, but beware of yielding to them." Then he added, "The Shah is in Najaf, I want you to join him on Wednesday morning," and He ordered an excellent robe to be given to me, together with a riding beast and a servant. The Pasha sent with us also some servants of his entourage and introduced us to the Persians who came to take us. We set out on Monday afternoon (al-'Asr), 22nd Shawwal. On the way, I kept, pondering the proofs on either side and thinking out possible answers, in case of an objection. I had all the time no other thought, but the marshalling of proofs and the refutation of objections, so I thought out upward of one hundred proofs, adding to each proof two or three answers to meet possible points arising from it. During the journey, I suffered from anguish and oppression of the heart. We entered *Hillat-Dubais ibn Mizyad*, which at the time, was under Persian control. There I met some of the followers of the *Sunna* and the *Jama'ah* (Community), who informed me that the Shah had called every Mufti in his kingdom to consult him on this question. They numbered 70, all being Rafidis. Hearing that, I said *la hawla wa la quwwata illa billah*, "There is no might, and no strength save in God," and added, "We belong to God and unto Him we shall return." Then I thought to myself: If I say I have not been commissioned to argue I shall not feel pleased with myself, and if I have a discussion with them, I fear they might communicate to the Shah what I have not said. So I decided not to have a debate with them, except in the presence of the Shah himself. I would tell him: my discussion with them necessitates the presence of a learned judge who is neither a Sunni, who might be accused of siding with them nor a Shi'i, who might be accused of siding with me. Consequently, we need a scholar who is either a Jew or a Christian or someone neither Sunni nor Shi'i. But as that is not possible you shall be the judge between us. God shall call you to account (concerning this) on the Day of Judgement. Therefore, listen to my arguments and theirs, that the truth may be revealed to you. I thought to myself: if he shows an inclination towards them, I shall contend and argue with him even if that leads to my execution. All this crossed my mind.

We left Hilla late on Wednesday evening, 24th Shawwal. It was such a damp misty night that one could not see one's own hand, nay—, it was even worse than the night of which the poet had said :—

“ On a night of Jumada, full of dampness

When the dog cannot see the tent rope nearby ”

We kept travelling that night, until we reached the shrine attributed to Dhul Kill, which is half-way between Hilla and Najaf. We alighted outside the building to have a little rest and then resumed our journey, performing the morning prayer near the well of *Dindan*. Suddenly someone came running post haste. He said to me : “ Hurry up, the Shah wishes to see you now.” The distance between me and the Shah's tent was two parasangs ; so I asked the messenger : “ What is the custom of the Shah when a messenger is sent to him by a king, does he ask for him as he is asking for me now, (that is to say) to be fetched from the road, or does he allow him for a while to rest then ask for him ? He answered, “ He never asks for anyone to be fetched from the road. He has not done this with anyone but you.” A melancholy feeling overwhelmed me, and I said to myself : the Shah has not asked for you so urgently but to force you to admit and approve of the Imamite sect. First, he will tempt you with money. If you comply with his wishes, well and good. Otherwise he will force you to it. What do you think now ? I decided to say what was right, even if that led to my destruction. Temptation would make no impression on me, neither would threats disturb me. Further, I said to myself : “ Islam came to a halt on the death of the Prophet, but it resumed its progress because of Abu Bakr. It stopped for the second time on the *Mihna* (trial of the question of the creation of the Qur'an), but it resumed its progress once more because of *Ahmad ibn Hanbal* (May God have mercy on him). Today Islam stops for the third time. If I stop, this will mean, God forbid, an eternal stop for it. On the other hand, if I march forward, it will march for ever. Its progress and halt are according to the progress and halt of its people. There is no doubt that the people of those provinces have a good opinion of my poor person and they will follow my example, good or bad. So my resolution became final. My feelings were no longer mixed, and I resolved to die with such a strength of will that death appeared easy. I said : I believe in God, His angels, His sacred Books, His apostles, the Day of Judgement, and that fate, good or bad, is from God the Almighty. I testify that there is no god but God, and that Muhammad is His Apostle. Thereupon, I rode forward repeating the two testimonial formulae (*ash Shahadatain*). But behold, two large lofty banners were within sight, like two tall palm trees. When I asked about them, I was told that they were the flags of the Shah, which he hoisted so that his senior officers should know where to dismount their horses before the camp: Some would dismount on the right of the flags; others on the left, and so on. We proceeded until we saw the tents, that of the Shah being fixed on seven long but slender props. We reached a place, known

to them as "*Kushk Khana*," which consisted of two groups of tents, facing each other ; there being on each side fifteen tents and in the centre a dome that had an arched hall—" *Iwan*," but that was without a pillar between the two summits of the tents. On the right, there were 4,000 soldiers with guns, on guard day and night. The tents on the left being empty, save for some chairs set about,—nothing else.

When I approached the *Kushk Khana*, I dismounted. A man came out to welcome me, asking me about the Pasha and his entourage ; his extensive knowledge of the Pasha's courtiers surprised me. Guessing my surprise, he said : " You seem as though you do not know me."

I said : " No, I do not know you." So he said : " I am 'Abd-ul-Karim Bey." I was in the service of Ahmad Pasha for some time, and I have been of late sent by the Persian Government to the Ottomans as an intermediary." While he was talking to me, about nine men came up to us. On seeing them, he rose to his feet as they greeted me. Not knowing them, I answered sitting. 'Abd-ul-Karim Bey began to introduce them one by one, saying : " This is *Mi'yar al-Mamalik*, Hasan Khan. And this is *Mustafa Khan*, and this *Nazar Ali Khan*, and this *Mirza Zaki*, and this *Mirza Kafi*. Hearing *Mi'yar al-Mamalik*'s name I rose. He, together with those who were with him, welcomed and shook hands with me. Now, this *Mi'yar al-Mamalik* was the Vizier of the Shah, of Georgian origin and one of the *Mawlas* (clients) of Shah Husain.

Asking me to go with them to meet the Shah, they raised the curtain that was in the middle of the *ruwaq*, (arched corridor). Another *ruwaq* appeared, separated from the first by a distance of three cubits. They stopped me there, saying : " you should stop when we stop, and walk when we do." We turned to the left. This was the end of the corridor which led to a fragrant wide courtyard, surrounded by an arched corridor which could be seen from a distance. It contained several tents for the Shah's wives and his household ; at the upper side being the tent of the Shah himself. Behold ! he was now at a distance of a bow-shot from me, sitting on a high chair. On seeing me, he shouted at the top of his voice : " Welcome, Abdulla Effendi. Ahmad Khan (meaning Ahmad Pasha) informed me that he had sent Abdulla Effendi to me," then he added, " Come closer..." So I went ten steps forward, all the *Khanat* being on my right, and Abd-ul-Karim Bey on my left. Once more he said, " come closer." I advanced again a distance equal to the first, and stopped. He insisted on my going closer to him, and I kept going forward in small steps, until I was at about five cubits from him. We all stopped. I saw, as well as one could judge from the manner of his sitting, that he was a tall man wearing a square white hood, like those of the Persians, round which was wound a *mirizi* turban crowned with pearls, rubies, diamonds and other precious stones. Round his neck were pearl and gem necklaces. On his upper arms were also pearls, diamonds and rubies sewed on pieces of cloth tied to his arms. The effects of senility and old age, appeared on his face. So much so, that his

front teeth were missing. He looked eighty years old. His beard was dyed black with *wasma*, (woad) and was beautiful. He had arched eyebrows, well apart ; rather small but beautiful eyes. In short, his countenance was beautiful. On seeing him, my dread and fear vanished. He spoke to me, as at first, in the Turkman language, saying "How is Ahmad Khan ?" I answered, "He is well and enjoying good health." He said, "Do you know what I want you for ?" I said, "No." He rejoined, "I have in my kingdom two groups ; Turkmans and Afghans who say to the Persians, "you are infidels." Now infidelity is a disgraceful thing. It is not seemly to have in my kingdom people who charge one another with infidelity. You are now commissioned to remove all the blasphemies and order the three groups what to do. Whatever you see or hear, you would communicate to me and pass on to Ahmad Khan." Saying so, he permitted me to retire, giving order that I should be the guest of *I'timad ad-Dawla* and that I should meet the *Mulla Bashi Ali Akbar* in the afternoon. I left him feeling highly elated, because the fate of the Persians had devolved on me. Reaching the Guest House, *Dar al-Diyafa*, I rested for a little while. The host *I'timad* came to the tent and took me to lunch. *Mihmandar Nazar 'Ali Khan* together with Abdul Karim and Abu Dhar Bey were at my service. When I went to *I'timad* to salute him, he answered my salute sitting. I felt chagrined and was angry, because he did not stand up. So I said to myself : When I sit down I shall say to *I'timad* : "The Shah has ordered the banning of all blasphemies, commissioning me with the execution of his order. The first blasphemy I shall remove will be yours, inasmuch as you intend to treat the learned with contempt and insult. I shall not be satisfied with less than your execution." Then leaving his assembly, I shall go to the Shah and inform him of what had happened. I thought of all this to myself and sat down ; whereupon, he stood up and welcomed me. And lo, he was a very tall man, fair of complexion, of large eyes, his beard dyed with woad, but a wise man capable of understanding discourses and comprehending discussions. He is more on the lenient side and rather inclined to the *Sunna* and the *Jama'ah*. When he rose I realized that this was their custom : they rise after their guest has sat down. So I had my lunch with him. Orders (from the Shah) were received that we should meet the *Mulla Bashi*. I rode, with the *Mihmandaris* walking in front of me. On my way, I met a man in Afghan attire who greeted and welcomed me. I said, "Who are you and what is your position ?" He answered, "I am *Mulla Hamza al-Qilja'i*, the Mufti of the Afghans. So I said, "Hamza, do you know Arabic ?" He replied "Yes." I said, "Look here, the Shah has ordered the removing of all blasphemies indulged in by the Persians. In case they quarrel about some such blasphemies or omit to mention some of them, I want you to support me, because I do not know their customs and their manner of worship. I should like you to mention to me whatever blasphemy you can think of in order that I abolish it. He replied, "Sir, beware of

being beguiled by the Shah's speech. He only sent you to the Mulla Bashi to find out, during their speech and discourse with you, what manner of man you are. So be on your guard with them." I said, "I fear that they may be unfair." He said, "In this respect, you can be at rest ; for the Shah has appointed an inspector over the Assembly and an inspector over the inspector, and still another over this. None of them is aware of the other, so none of them can pass on to the Shah what is not true. When I approached the tent of the *Mulla Bashi*, he came out on foot to welcome me. He was a short dark man with high temples reaching the middle of his head. Dismounting from my horse, I was welcomed by him. Making me sit on the dais, he sat in the manner of a student below me. We conversed until the Mulla Bashi diverted his talk to the Mufti of the Afghans.

This led to a preliminary discussion of Ali's right to the Caliphate. A more important meeting, however, took place later on, in which the cursing of the Companions by certain sects of the Shi'a was debated. There were scholars from both sides, Suwaidi acting as an arbitrator. At the end of the discussion both sides acknowledged each other as Muslim brothers, and complete agreement was reached. Shaking hands with one another, they kept reiterating, "welcome brother !"¹

The contending parties held me witness regarding the obligations they undertook. The meeting came to an end shortly before sunset on Wednesday, 24th Shawwal. I looked and behold ! the Persians who were waiting upon us and surrounding us numbered over ten thousand. Four hours of the night had already lapsed before *I'timad* came back from the Shah. As it was customary on such occasions, he said to me, "The Shah has thanked you for what you have done and prayed for you. He sends you his greetings and requests you to be present tomorrow with the other scholars, because he has ordered them to write down on a sheet of paper all the resolutions they promised to adhere to, affixing their seals thereto. He requests you to put your testimony at the top of the sheet, to the effect that you had been a witness of the three sects² regarding their undertakings and resolutions, affixing your seal under your name. I said : "very well ! (lit. with love and honour حبا وكرامة)."

Before noon on Thursday, 25th of the said month, order was received that we should all be present at our first meeting place. The Persians formed a line from outside the village to the gate of the sepulchre standing in a great crowd, numbering about 60,000. After we had sat down a gazette was brought along. It was over seven spans in length.

The document was read out and all present endorsed it, including Abdulla as-Suwaidi, in spite of some minor objections he made, after which he was conducted to the Shah who thanked him again. Nadir

1. We have found it expedient to cut out the various arguments advanced by the Shi'a and Sunni scholars as there is nothing new in them, and they can all be found in Sunni-Shi'a polemical works.

2. He means the Persians, Turkmans and Afghans.

went on to say a word or two about Ahmad Pasha, speaking of him in the following vein :—“ I do not trust him, nor do the Ottomans. He is suspected by both parties. May God increase his might and raise his status.” Then he said : “ O, Abdulla Effendi, do not think that the Shahinsha is boasting of that (*i.e.*, his efforts in removing the cursing of the Companions by the Persians) because this is something that was made possible by God. He led me to it. The abolition of the cursing was carried out by me, though the Ottomans from the time of Sultan Salim to the present day, have been recruiting huge armies, spending large sums of money and destroying human life to extirpate the practice of cursing, but in vain. Whereas I, thanks to God and His assistance, have effected it easily. This disgraceful practice emanated from the vile Shah Isma‘il who was prompted by the people of *Lanijan* ; and it has been preserved to this day.” I said to him, “You will, please God, bring all the Persians back, as they were formerly, to the Sunnite fold.” He replied, “ If God Most High wishes, but gradually, little by little.” Then he added, “ O, Abdulla Effendi, if I wish to boast, I could say that on my throne at the present moment here are four sultans, for I am the Sultan of Persia, the Sultan of Turkestan, the Sultan of India and the Sultan of the Afghans. But all this was through the Divine assistance of God. I have bestowed a great favour on all the Muslims because I have abolished the cursing of the Companions. I hope they will intercede for me.” He further added, “ I would have sent you back straight away because I know Ahmad Khan is waiting for you, but I request you to stay till tomorrow, for I have made arrangements for you to lead the Friday prayer at the Mosque of Kufa. I should like you to mention the Companions from the pulpit in their usual order, and pray for my elder brother, His Imperial Majesty the Ottoman Sultan, before me. He should be spoken of well. Then prayers can be pronounced for the younger brother (meaning himself), but to a lesser extent.”

(Next day the memorable congregational prayer was held at the celebrated Kufa Mosque, and proved a success, after which Suwaidi made for Baghdad feeling highly elated on account of the part he had played in bringing about a *rapprochement* between the Shi‘a and the Sunna)

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