

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

### The Role of Dr. *Amīr Khān Amīr-A'lam* in the Modernization of Health and Medicine in Iran based on Legal Documents

#### Abstract

*Amīr Khān Amīr-A'lam* (1876-1961) can be considered the icon of modern Iranian medicine. Several books and articles have been written about him and various aspects of his professional life have been studied. However, the author of this article, by accessing a collection of newly found documents, has obtained new and interesting information on the modernization of health and medicine and the role of *Amīr-A'lam* in it. Relying on the accepted methods of historical and documentary research, the author has first introduced and analyzed these documents and then has tried to present, classify and analyze the new information in fields such as the role of *Amīr-A'lam* in the modernization of military medicine, the establishment of the first women's hospital, reconstruction of *Razavi Dār al-Shafā* and finally the establishment and expansion of Iran's *Jamiat-e Shir-o Khorshid* (lit. Lion and Sun Society of Iran). These documents show what the state of military medicine was like before modernization, how *Amīr-A'lam*'s altruistic actions led to the establishment of the Women and Children Hospital, and what obstacles and problems *Amīr-A'lam* faced in rebuilding the *Razavi Dār al-Shafā*. Also, for the first time, the establishment and expansion of Iran's *Jamiat-e Shir-o Khorshid*, which later became Iran's Red Crescent Society, is narrated by *Amīr-A'lam*.

**Key words:** *Amīr Khān Amīr-A'lam*, Health, Medicine, Modernization, Iran's *Jamiat-e Shir-o Khorshid*, Iran

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## Introduction

Perhaps *Amīr Khān Amīr-A'lam*, due to his services and influence, can be considered the most important Iranian physician in the period of medical modernization in Iran (Aqeli, 2002). He had a special place both in the government and among the people and was a well-known figure (Salari, 2014, pp. 264-265 & 268). He was a good example of a modern Iranian-educated physician. Moreover, *Amīr-A'lam* had close relations with the kings of the time, such as Ahmad Shāh (r. 1909-1925) and Rezā Shāh (r. 1925-1941), and was a private physician for these kings (Tashayyod, 1961, p. 11). He was a professor of medicine, participated in international conferences on health and medicine, regulated medical laws in Iran, established modern health and medical institutions, launched public vaccinations, founded the first national charity, and coined and found Persian words for specialized medical terms. There are numerous books and articles written about his character and his life's accomplishments. However, now, more than 60 years after his death, some information has been found that sheds new light on his life and career. This information was obtained from a legal case in the Judiciary Documentation Center. We now have, for the first time, *Amīr-A'lam*'s autobiography, along with several other valuable documents, including a complete list of his occupations in more detail. The importance of these documents stems from the fact that the life and activities of *Amīr-A'lam* reflect the history of medical modernization in the early twentieth century. In sum, it can be said that we now have more information on the history and procedure of health modernization in Iran. (Figure 1)

So far, several works have been written about *Amīr-A'lam*. The first and perhaps one of the most important of these works is *Armaghān-e Javid* (lit. The Eternal Gift) or *Zendegi khold ashian-e doctor Amir A'lam* (Dr. *Amīr-A'lam*'s Heavenly Life), (1961), written by Ali Akbar Tashayyod (1896-?). Tashayyod was a legal advisor and a close friend of *Amīr-A'lam*. He later turned to Islamic studies and founded the *Majalley-e Tārīkh-e Eslām* (Journal of Islamic History) (Fakharian, 2017, pp. 208-209)<sup>1</sup>. These two people had a close relationship, especially at the end of *Amīr-A'lam*'s life, when he retired from government jobs, and this caused *Amīr-A'lam* to submit some of his documents to Tashayyod for publication (Tashayyod, 1961, pp. 9-12). *Amīr-A'lam* may have wanted to publish his biography as well, but he did not have the opportunity to do so, as *Amīr-A'lam* died shortly before the book was published in 1961. *Armaghān-e Javid*

1- It is interesting to know that he is the father of Mohammad Ismāil Tashayyod (1927-2011), the founder of modern anesthesia in Iran.



contains two memoirs, written by himself, one being written at the time when he was a student in France and the other containing lectures he gave on various occasions. Another book was written by Shari'at Shams Torbaqan (1926-2014). He studied medicine and was *Amīr-A'lam*'s student. Although this book, *A Guide to the School of Medicine, Pharmacy, Dentistry, Hospitals, and Affiliated Schools* (1953), is recently published, it is mainly on *Amīr-A'lam*'s his first book, *Armaghān-e Javīd*, encompassing several articles, including an article he had previously written on *Amīr-A'lam*. The third book is a small book for teenagers written by Hassan Salari (1976), which is in fact an extended form of the article he had previously published. Some documents are found in this book. However, all of them are limited to the documents of the National Archives of Iran and the Library of Parliament. None of the authors of these works were aware of the existence of the documents referred to in this article and hence they did not refer to them. Mohsen Roustaei (1963), in his two-volume book *History of Medicine in Iran* (2003), provides a brief biography of *Amīr-A'lam*, mentioning his services to the country in the first volume, but this information has already been referred to in the above-mentioned sources. In the present article, based on some brand new information, an attempt has been made to exhibit parts of *Amīr-A'lam*'s career. Therefore, the present article has not focused on his participation in international health conferences during his stay in France, his activities at Tehran Medical School, or his efforts to pass modern medical laws, because they have already been discussed in detail in other articles and books.



*Figure 1. Amīr Khān Amīr-A'lam in middle age. The picture is taken from Institute for Political Research.*

#### **The analysis of the newly found documents**

The documents examined in this article, which are published for the first time, are taken from a legal case related to *Amīr-A'lam*'s retirement. These documents are kept in case number 1029/6 in the Legal Documentation Center of the Judiciary. According to these documents, in 1944, *Amīr-A'lam*, after 38 years of government service, decided to retire at the age of 68, but he faced some obstacles in this regard. One of the most important obstacles was that, according to the country's Pension Office, *Amīr-A'lam* had not paid



the amount of pension insurance at some point during his service, and now he had to pay all those amounts to the government at once. He, who had spent years of his life serving the people and modernizing health and medicine rejected paying that money. Hence, he filed a complaint with the Ministry of Finance and Pension in the judiciary. The case now available is related to the same complaint to the Supreme Court. This shows that *Amīr-A'lam*'s complaint in the lower court and the appeal court had not been resolved, and hence, in the last stage, he appealed to the Supreme Court. To prove his legitimacy in this lawsuit, *Amīr-A'lam* tried to present various documents to the court indicating his services until 1944. One of these documents is the autobiography of *Amīr-A'lam* addressed to the General Administration of the Faculty of Medicine and Hospitals, which is typed in seven pages. In addition to this unique biography, there are other interesting documents in the file, including:

1. A two-page handwritten letter from *Amīr-A'lam* in which he complained about the negligence of the government regarding his "honest and loyal" services
2. A complete and detailed list of *Amīr-A'lam*'s jobs from 1906 to 1940, including the date of birth, place of residence, the exact date of employment and end of the service, and the amount of salary in each job (Figure 2)
3. *Amīr-A'lam*'s grades, along with that of discipline, at the Lyon Military Medical School.
4. Official translation of the decree of the King of Prussia in awarding a military medal to *Amīr-A'lam*
5. Other documents including certificates issued by the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Ministry of Interior, as well as the original verdict issued by the Supreme Court on the subject of the lawsuit

The information on newly found documents can be divided into two general sections: *Amīr-A'lam*'s services and personal life. In this article, we will only examine *Amīr-A'lam*'s activities in the modernization of health and medicine in Iran, and in another article, we will study the developments related to his personal life based on the present documents.

### **Military medicine**

According to available sources, on June 15, 1914, *Amīr-A'lam* established Ahmadiyyeh Hospital, which was the first military hospital in Iran, at the end of Ahmad Shāh's era (Nateq, 1996, p. 262; Aqeli, 2002). Our information about this hospital is largely based on the opening speech of *Amīr-A'lam*, published by Tashayyod. In this speech, although there is valuable information in terms of the structure of the hospital and the recruitment of specialist doctors, the status of military medicine in the Qājār era before the establishment of this hospital and military medical developments in the newly established gendarmerie was not clear to us. But now, thanks to *Amīr-A'lam*'s biography, we have access to new information related to these areas. For the first time, we have come across some interesting details about the military health status. According to *Amīr-A'lam*, before the establishment of the Ahmadiyyeh Hospital, which was the first modern military hospital in Iran, only the Cossack Brigade had a nursing home or clinic where Russian physicians treated Cossack patients (*Amīr-A'lam*, 1944, p. 2). The Cossack Brigade was in fact the cavalry unit of the Iranian army, founded during the time of *Nāsser al-Dīn Shāh Qājār* (r. 1848-1896) and was modeled after the Russian military army (Fahimi, 1999, p. 336).





The Russians sent several physicians to Iran to ensure the health of their forces, and these physicians formed the core of modern Iranian military medicine (Hashemian, 2000, pp. 308-316). *Amīr-A'lam* further added that at that time, in fact, there was no army medical service to meet the need of the Iranian army. For instance, the army did not have a hospital of its own, and since soldiers either guarded the homes of influential people or were engaged in other occupations and hence were scattered throughout the cities, they did not have access to doctors and hospitals. In fact, they were occasionally taken care of and treated by traditional physicians and pharmacists. Also according to the information found in this biography, Colonel Hjalmarson (1868-1919), who came to Iran to form the Gendarmerie, appointed *Amīr-A'lam* to establish the health service of this new force (Amir-A'lam, 1944, p. 3). The Gendarmerie was a military force for securing security in suburban areas which was formed under Hjalmarson in 1912 (Khazaei, 2017, p. 198). *Amīr-A'lam* set up a new health organization for the Gendarmerie and hired new doctors for this purpose. Having noticed the poor health and medical condition of the army and Gendarmerie, *Amīr-A'lam* thought of establishing a special hospital for the military forces (Amir-A'lam, 1944, p. 3).

At the suggestion of *Amīr-A'lam* and with the consent of the then Minister of War, he dismissed all the old military doctors and hired newly qualified doctors. He named *Karīm Hedāyat* (1886-1973), *Mūsā Feyz*, *Hakīm Azam* (1877-1938), his brother *Gholām Hossein A'lam* (1884-1947), and a non-medical military member as members of the examination board. It was also decided that only young physicians, such as *Mozayyen al-Soltān* and *Hossein Bahrāmi Ehyā al-Saltaneh* (1876-1940), would participate in the entrance exam, but, *Hāzeq al-Dowleh Saqafī*, brother of *Khalil Khān Saqafī* (1863-1944), was also accepted although he was an old physician. These people were recruited by the army and divided into different regiments, so that there were three doctors and one clinic in each regiment. Interestingly, the army's medical teams were present in the military camps under the flag of Iran's *Jamiat-e Shir-o Khorshid*, even though this society was not yet formed. Another important point about *Amīr-A'lam*'s efforts in this regard is that, by building the Ahmadiyyeh Military Hospital, he also pioneered the establishment of the first laboratory in Iran (Amir-A'lam, 1944, pp. 2-3).

### Women and Children's Hospital

In the available sources, there is not much information about the Women and Children's Hospital, which was established in Tehran on the initiative of *Amīr-A'lam*. Since arriving in Iran, *Amīr-A'lam* was always interested in establishing a specialized maternity and children's hospital. His detailed speech at the Dār al-Fonūn, as the head of the state hygiene, reflected his constant concern. In this lecture, he blamed the uninformed midwives and the prevalence of misconceptions about childbirth and infants responsible for the poor condition of childbirth in Iran. Then, he emphasized the need to establish a maternity hospital (Tashayyod, 1961, pp. 49-65). This idea came true years later. According to the information we now have from the new documents, *Amīr-A'lam*, in a philanthropic act, devoted two and a half years of his income from visiting patients to this project, and on April 23, 1917, he succeeded in establishing this hospital. It is interesting to note that this hospital, in addition to treating women and children, put the training of midwives on its agenda, and in fact, it can be considered one of the first teaching hospitals in Iran (Amir-



A'lam, 1944, p. 3). This hospital was later renamed *Amīr-A'lam* Hospital in 1944 and is still called after his name (Saleh, 1953, pp. 396, 400).

### ***Razavi Dār- al-Shafā***

In 1917, *Amīr-A'lam* decided to go to Mashhad to visit the shrine of Imam Rezā (AS). But during this trip, he faced the miserable condition of *Razavi Dār al-Shafā* and decided to stay in Mashhad and modernize this medical center. Our information on *Amīr-A'lam*'s actions is mostly based on the two speeches published in *Armaghān-e Jāvid*. There, *Amīr-A'lam* faced a lot of local opposition to the reconstruction of the hospital, but, for some reason, he did not mention the details of these obstacles in his speeches. Now, in the recently obtained documents, we have interesting information about these objections and his actions regarding *Razavi Dār al-Shafā*. (Figure 3)

As *Amīr-A'lam* mentioned in his autobiography, *Dār al-Shafā*'s endowments suffered from the shortage of money mainly because of fraud done by some influential people. *Mortezā Qolī Khān Nāinī* (d. 1935), the famous guardian of *Āstān-e Qods*, warned *Amīr-A'lam* that this cannot be accomplished mainly because of the opposition of influential people and the bad economic conditions caused by the famine. *Nayyer al-Dowleh* (d. 1918), the former governor of Khorasan, repeated the same warnings in a letter to him and reminded him of his failure to fix *Dār al-Shafā*'s problem. The head of Khorasan police also warned him confidentially that this would cost *Amīr-A'lam*'s life and that the police would not be able to save his life. However, *Amīr-A'lam* was determined to carry out this project despite these warnings. In the first step, he obtained official permits from the then prime minister, *Mostowfi al-Mamālek* (1932-1874) and *Nāinī*. In the next smart move, *Amīr-A'lam*, in order to gain the support of local doctors, did not establish a clinic. But as soon as the construction of the new *Dār al-Shafā* building started, he opened an office and asked the patients to pay their visit fee to the *Dār al-Shafā* fund. In the following, he talked about the threats of unknown people against him and that every day he received anonymous letters, threatening him to bury his body in "*Arz-e Tūs*" (Mashhad) (*Amīr-A'lam*, 1944, pp. 4-5). Despite these obstacles and problems, he finally succeeded in rebuilding *Razavi Dār al-Shafā*, the details of which are mentioned in his speeches.

### ***Iran's Jamiat-e Shir-o Khorshid***

Iran's *Jamiat-e Shir-o Khorshid* was the first national charity association of Iran that was established with the efforts of *Amīr-A'lam*. (Figure 4) This association was later renamed to the Red Crescent and is still active (Qasemlu, 2006, p. 742). Except for three pages of Tashayyod's notes on how to establish Iran's *Jamiat-e Shir-o Khorshid*, and some scattered documents and short news from some publications, we did not have any first-hand account of *Amīr-A'lam* himself about the establishment of this modern institution. But now, we are faced with a coherent narrative of the founder of this association, which is unique in its kind. *Amīr-A'lam* mentioned that this institution was established in 1923 after seventeen months of hard work. According to this account, the establishment of this national charity was announced during an official ceremony in Golestān Palace in the presence of Ahmad Shāh and the delegation of ministers of *Moshīr al-Dowleh* (1935-1871) under the chairmanship of the then crown prince, *Mohammad Hassan Mīrzā* (1942-1899); and then the news was telegraphed to the International Committee of the Red Cross in Geneva.



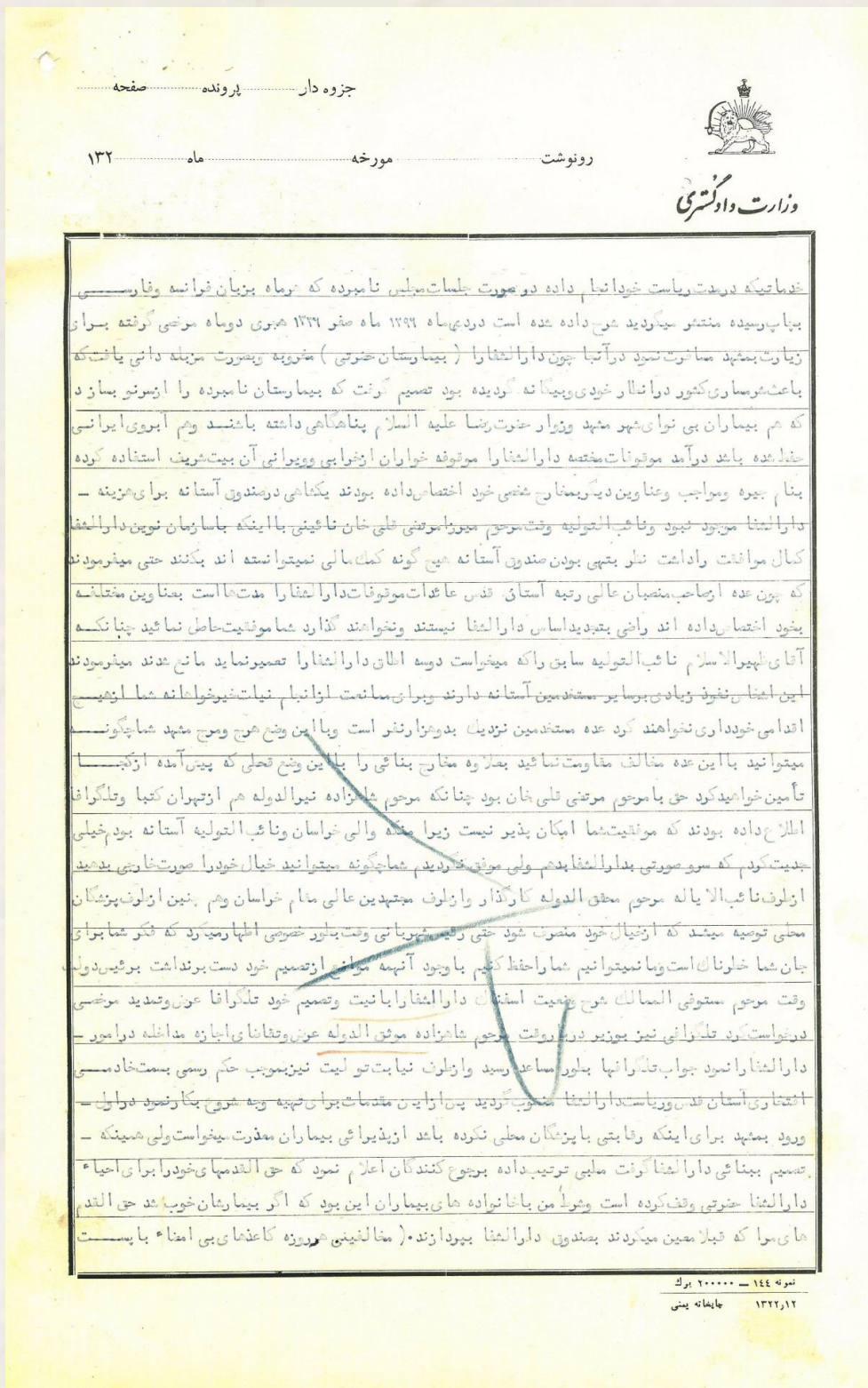


Figure 3. The fourth page of Amīr-A'lam's autobiography. On this page, he has explained how to rebuild Razavi Dār al-Shafā. (Amir-A'lam, 1944)



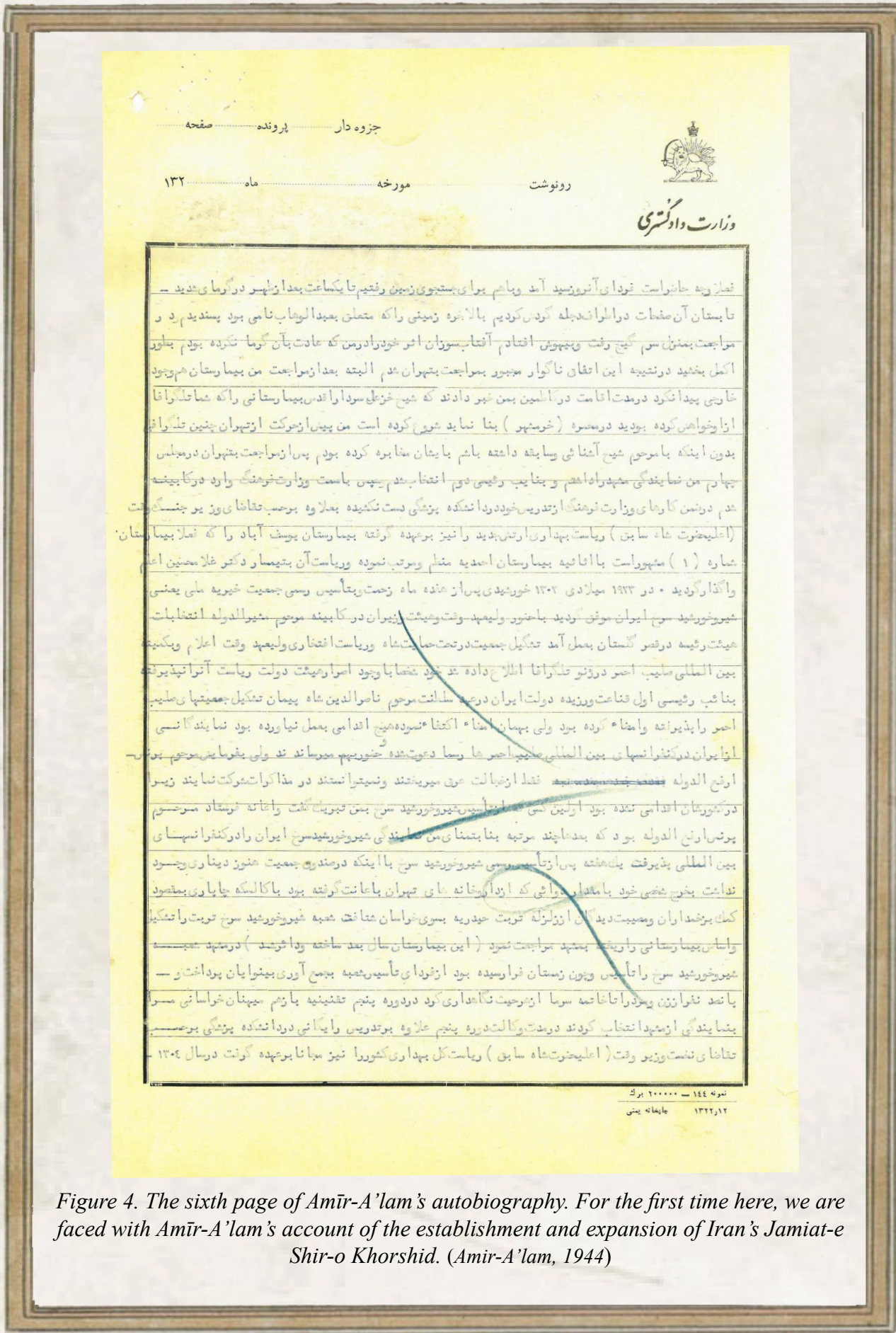


Figure 4. The sixth page of Amīr-A'lam's autobiography. For the first time here, we are faced with Amīr-A'lam's account of the establishment and expansion of Iran's Jamiat-e Shir-o Khorshid. (Amir-A'lam, 1944)

First, it was insisted that *Amīr-A'lam* take over the presidency of this institution, but he did not accept and only accepted to be its first deputy. Previously, during the time of *Nāsser al-Dīn Shāh Qājār*, the agreement of the Red Cross communities was accepted by Iran, and representatives from Iran were invited and attended the international conferences of the Red Cross. But according to Prince *Arfa' al-Dowleh* (1854-1937), they only felt ashamed and did not participate in the discussion, because they had not accomplished anything in their country. *Amīr-A'lam* further added that the first person who congratulated him for establishing the society was *Arfa' al-Dowleh* who also allocated some money for that. Later, at the request of *Amīr-A'lam*, he participated in international conferences as a representative of Iran's *Jamiat-e Shir-o Khorshid*. *Amīr-A'lam*, who was previously a representative of Khorasan in the fourth term of the parliament, when the earthquake happened in Torbat Heydarieh, in May 1923, he, as the representative of the society, and while there was no money in the fund, volunteered to collect some medicine from Tehran pharmacies and to go to the earthquake-stricken area on his own expense (*Amir-A'lam*, 1944, p. 6). Torbat Heydarieh earthquake on May 27, 1923, was one of the biggest earthquakes in the history of natural disasters in Iran and caused the death of thousands of people. On June 11, 1923, Ahmad Shāh held an official ceremony in Golestān Palace and asked the nobles to donate money to help the earthquake victims (*Bahar*, 2008, pp. 378-379; *Pourqanbar*, 2019, p. 29; *Khatibi*, 2021, p. 88). But these measures were not enough and the intensity and scope of the earthquake were such that a relief force was needed to help the people beyond the existing institutions and organizations. Therefore, during his stay in Khorasan, *Amīr-A'lam* established the first branch of Iran's *Jamiat-e Shir-o Khorshid* in Torbat Heydarieh and then the second branch in Mashhad. In another benevolent act, he settled 500 homeless people in Mashhad during the winter of 1923.

In another incident, on May 1, 1929, an earthquake shook another region in Khorasan, this time Shīrvān, and many villages were destroyed and many people were injured. The second major action of Iran's *Jamiat-e Shir-o Khorshid* was to help Shīrvān earthquake victims. According to the report of *Abbas Masoudi* (1895-1974), the famous journalist and founder of *Ettelāat* newspaper, who had gone to Shīrvān to prepare news, *Amīr-A'lam* went to Mashhad this time to help the people affected by the earthquake, and from there he left for Shīrvān with medicine, enough equipment, and several doctors. (*Masoudi*, 2016, pp. 67-68). In his autobiography, *Amīr-A'lam* wrote that he remained in the region for 45 days and set up fixed and mobile hospitals although he was threatened by *Zolfou's*, one of the regional rebels. After visiting Mashhad, *Seyyed Hasan Taghizādeh* (1878-1970), who was the governor of Khorasan at that time, informed him that American newspapers had written that this was the first time that Iran did not receive help from any country in this type of incidents. Likewise, *Major General Amanollāh Jahānbāni* (1895-1974), the commander of the Khorasan forces and the head of the Khorasan branch of Iran's *Jamiat-e Shir-o Khorshid*, told him that Russian newspapers had positively reflected *Amīr-A'lam's* services (*Amir-A'lam*, 1944, p. 7).

The following year, on May 7, 1930, a powerful earthquake occurred in Salmās, one of the provinces of Azerbaijan, as a result of which at least 3,000 people were killed and many villages were destroyed (*Malekzadeh Dilmaghani*, 2004, p. 15). *Amīr-A'lam* narrated in his autobiography that he immediately went there by plane and took similar measures to what he had done in Khorasan. All this gained prestige and fame for the



newly established Iran's *Jamiat-e Shir-o Khorshid*, and various branches of the society soon opened in the cities of Mashhad, Tabriz, Torbat, Birjand, Rezaieh (Urmia), Sari, Sanandaj, Astara, Ardabil, Khoi, Mako, Mahabad, Kerman, Shiraz, Isfahan, and Qom (Amir-A'lam, 1944, p. 7).

*Amīr-A'lam* was in the parliament on behalf of the people of Khorasan and Tehrān in several terms. In 1921, he became the Minister of Science and Endowments. However, none lasts long. It is assumed that owing to the government's interference in the affairs of Iran's *Jamiat-e Shir-o Khorshid*, he resigned in 1934. He considered this against the law. Also, in 1935, he was dismissed as a private physician of *Rezā Shāh* (Amir-A'lam, 1944, p. 7). These two events had negative effects on him, making him depressed (Tashayyod, 1961, pp. 11-12). However, he returned to the government once in 1948, as the Health Minister, but due to his illness, he resigned soon and did not accept any other government posts until his death (Yaghmaei, 1973, p. 289).

### Conclusion

*Amīr Khān Amīr-A'lam* can be considered the most influential Iranian doctor in modern history. In the past few years, books and articles have been written about him. Examining these works shows that the main source of almost all of them is a book called *Armaghān-e Javīd*, which was printed by one of *Amīr-A'lam*'s friends, Ali Akbar Tashayyod. This book is a collection of his notes and the text of his speeches. In addition, all the works that have been written about *Amīr-A'lam*, including the article and book written by Shams Torbaqan, either contain repeated material or rarely rely on verified documents.

In this article, an attempt was made to present a narrative of the untold stories of *Amīr-A'lam*'s professional life using newly found documents. These legal documents were obtained from *Amīr-A'lam*'s retirement case at the Legal Documentation Center of the Judiciary, showing how the most famous doctor in Iran at that time was caught in the process of bureaucracy. However, *Amīr-A'lam*'s main intention in providing the documents was to defend his rights and achieve early retirement. But his approach to providing the court with information about the services he had done in the previous years has provided us with new and fascinating details of his life. The medical condition of the army before *Amīr-A'lam*'s reforms, the details of government and local opposition to the reconstruction of Razavi Dar al-Shafa, and *Amīr-A'lam*'s unique account of the establishment and actions of Iran's *Jamiat-e Shir-o Khorshid* in the first years of its activity are among the valuable information that has not been available to researchers before this.

### Conflict of Interest

None.

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