

Was Safavid Iran an Empire?

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Abstract

This paper examines the organizing ideological and infrastructural principles of the Safavid state structure and questions whether the Safavid state had the capacity and universality to qualify as an empire. Until now, the Safavid state has only been given equal status to the Ottoman and Mughal state as a “gunpowder empire”. But with this approach some other aspects tip the balance towards the cohesion and coherence that enabled the Safavid Empire to function as an empire in spite of exiguous economic resources and the limitations of ideological underpinnings. When some of these aspects lost their force, this contributed to the dissolution of the glue that kept Iranian society together and to the demise of the Safavid state in the early eighteenth century.

Le cadre de cette contribution est l'État safavide et elle en explore les principes de la structure étatique au niveau de l'organisation, de l'idéologie, et de l'infrastructure pour établir si cet état a été un véritable empire au niveau de ses capacités et de son caractère universel. Jusqu'à maintenant l'État safavide s'est vu attribuer le statut 'd'empire de poudre à canon', pareil aux États ottoman et moghul. Mais en abordant ce thème du côté structure on aperçoit quelques aspects qui font pencher la balance vers une cohérence interne. C'est qu'en dépit de ses faibles ressources économiques et tenant compte des limites du support idéologique en général, l'Empire safavide savait remplir son rôle d'empire. À mesure que la force cohésive s'affaiblissait, la société iranienne se dissolvait de façon à sonner le glas de l'État safavide au début du dix-huitième siècle.

Keywords

cohesion of empires, Safavid Empire, Shah 'Abbas I, imperial ideology

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Introduction

In their treatment of the early modern Muslim world, scholars have long categorized and treated the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal states under one collective rubric—that of the so-called gunpowder empires.¹ Although the term seems to have gone a bit out of fashion lately, it remains the only one in which the Safavids are given equal standing with their neighbors, and the only one in which the Safavid state (1501-1722) enjoys the unqualified status of empire.² What is more, in much of the secondary literature on early modern West and South Asian empires, including that of a comparative nature, the Safavids are conspicuous by their absence. This is true for general studies as much as for more focused ones. In his recent study of Europe in the period between 1500 and 1800, *Kings, Nobles & Commoners*, Jeremy Black discusses the great expanding Eurasian empires, mentions the Ottomans and the Mughals in the same breath with France and the Habsburgs, but omits any reference to the Safavids.³ M. N. Pearson is equally as explicit. In a lengthy article on merchants and states in an Asian context, he compares Asian empires and goes on to discuss the Mughals and the Ottomans without even mentioning the Safavids.⁴ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, searching for candidates for the status of empire in the period between 1400 and 1750 CE, identifies the Ottomans and the Mughals in the Islamic Middle East, but similarly chooses not to refer to the Safavids.⁵ John Darwin, while not ignoring Iran in his recent *After Tamerlane: The History of Empire since 1405*, accords the Safavids much less

¹ The term “gunpowder empires” for the Ottoman, Safavid, and Mughal states was introduced by M. G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam, vol. 3: The Gunpowder Empires and Modern Times* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974): 18.

² Modern scholars who exclusively deal with the Safavids routinely call Iran in this period an empire, but they typically do not define or even discuss the term and its meaning. See, for example, R. Abisaab, *Converting Persia: Religion and Power in the Safavid Empire* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2004), and A. Newman, *Safavid Iran: Birth of a Persian Empire* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2006).

³ J. Black, *Kings, Nobles and Commoners. States and Societies in Early Modern Europe: A Revisionist History* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004): 11.

⁴ M. N. Pearson, “Merchants and States.” In *The Political Economy of Merchant Empires: State Power and World Trade 1350-1750*, ed. J. Tracy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991): 41-116.

⁵ Sanjay Subrahmanyam, “Written on Water: Designs and Dynamics in the Portuguese *Estado da Índia*.” In *Empires: Perspectives from Archeology and History*, eds S. E. Alcock et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001): 42-69. The same author does give full and equal treatment to the Safavids in his “Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia.” *Modern Asian Studies* 31 (1997): 735-62.

space than the Ottomans and the Mughals.⁶ The index of Karen Barkey's recent study of the Ottoman Empire in a comparative perspective, finally, lists the Safavids as an empire, yet in her text the author barely pays attention to Iran (or to Mughal India, for that matter), and certainly not from a comparative perspective—the comparisons Barkey makes are rather with the Romans, the Habsburgs, and Muscovite Russia.⁷ The Ottoman Empire, one has to conclude, dominates the discussion about early modern Muslim empires, and whenever the analysis extends to the axis between Istanbul and Agra, that axis is shaped like a dumbbell with a heavy weight on either side but little more than a thin bar in between.

Is this curious omission simply a function of the fact that the Safavid state was so much weaker than its neighbors to the east and west, so much less densely populated—at perhaps six million people compared to at least 100 million for India and up to thirty million for the Ottoman Empire—so much less endowed with natural resources, and thus so much less productive? These circumstances are likely to play a role in the reluctance of scholars to include the Safavids in the empire club, but it is doubtful that they are the only reason. Even without the gunpowder epithet, the Ottoman state naturally and automatically seems to accede to the status of empire. The Ottoman foundation myth, represented as a dream, comes to us as a tree spanning the world.⁸ The territory effectively controlled from Istanbul spanned, if not the world, two civilizations, Christianity and Islam. Of these, the first may have been the most significant for giving the Ottomans a place in a lineage of empires going back to Byzantium and, ultimately, Rome, the archetypical empire. The direct inheritors of the Byzantine Empire, the Ottomans were in a position to claim the mantle of Constantinople as a second Rome after they had conquered the city in 1453.⁹ In the early sixteenth century, they added further luster to their

⁶ J. Darwin, *After Tamerlane: The Global History of Empire since 1405* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2008).

⁷ K. Barkey, *Empire of Difference: The Ottomans in Comparative Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

⁸ C. Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996): 8-9. The Ottomans also sought a dynastic and territorial connection with the Seljuqs, and, more specifically, with the Oğuz leader Oğuz Khan, who in their genealogy became a world-conqueror and a proto-Muslim. See C. Imber, "The Ottoman Dynastic Myth." *Turcica* 19 (1987): 7-27.

⁹ D. Goffman and C. Stoop, "Empire as Composite: The Ottoman Polity and the Typology of Dominion." In *Imperialism. Historical and Literary Investigations, 1500-1900*, eds Balachandra Rajan and E. Sauer (New York and Houndsmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave

legitimacy by defeating the Egyptian Mamluks and by bringing Mecca and Medina, Islam's two holy cities, under their protection. The millenarian claims of the Ottoman sultans reigning in this period, Selim (1512-20), and Süleyman (1520-66), reflected in the title *sahib-qiran*, "Lord of the Conjunction," or "world conqueror who establishes universal dominion," illustrate this enhanced status (while also harking back to the Central Asian antecedents of the Ottomans in the form of the Timurid legacy).¹⁰ For the next four hundred years, no Muslim state would match the Sublime Porte in the size of the territory it controlled and the military power it was able to mobilize. Westerners, confronted with Ottoman expansionism from the 1300s onward, recognized this early on. At least until the mid-sixteenth century, they regarded the Ottoman sultan as a ruler worthy of respect for being just and wise in addition to being powerful, and described him as a Renaissance prince rather than an Oriental despot.¹¹

The rulers of the Mughal Empire were never treated with similar respect by their Western counterparts. The reign of Sultan Akbar (1560-1605) saw the beginning of a lively interaction on a cultural level between Europe and India, most of it conducted by Portuguese Jesuit missionaries, as well as some diplomatic activity. Yet India was remote, did not pose a military threat to the Europeans, and thus failed to conjure up an image of redoubtable military might. On the other hand, the Mughal realm was vast, variegated, and immensely productive, something that attracted merchants from far and wide and made India the world's economic powerhouse until the Industrial Revolution. These vast resources and the sheer size of their realm caused the Mughals to feel and act like the empire builders they were, fully on a par with the Ottomans. The Mughals, too, had a foundation myth in the form of an ancestral dream narrative. They also saw themselves, and were readily recognized by their regional peers, as the

Macmillan, 2004): 132-3. See also G. Hagen, "Ottoman Understandings of the World in the Seventeenth Century." In R. Dankoff, *An Ottoman Mentality: The World of Evliya Çelebi* (Leiden: Brill, 2006): 236.

¹⁰ See C. Fleischer, "The Lawgiver as Messiah: The Making of the Imperial Image in the Reign of Süleyman." In *Soliman le Magnifique et son temps*, ed. G. Veinstein (Paris: Fayard, 1992): 162.

¹¹ For this, see L. Valensi, *The Birth of the Despot: Venice and the Sublime Porte* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1993). For an interpretation that emphasizes continuity in the image of the Turkish sultan as despotic, see G. Poumarède, *Pour en finir avec la Croisade. Mythes et réalités de la lutte contre les Turcs aux seizième et dix-septième siècles* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004): 69-72.

immediate inheritors of the Mongol tradition and, more directly as successors to the vast empire created by Timur Lang, one of the world's quintessential empire builders. Some Mughal rulers bore the title *sahib-qiran* as well, arguably with more justification than the Ottomans given their direct descent from the Timurids.¹²

The case of the Safavids seems more ambiguous. As said, Safavid Iran commanded far fewer economic resources than the Ottoman and the Mughal states, and Isfahan certainly projected less military power than Istanbul. Iran in general lacked some of the status-enhancing ingredients typically associated with an empire. Most notable in this regard is the absence of a clear and fixed political and economic center. Safavid rulers long remained peripatetic. Iran's capital was where the shah and his large entourage happened to be. Only in the 1590s did the dynasty acquire a capital worthy of the name—Isfahan—and at no point in its long history did Iran cluster around a nexus like Istanbul, the city that had served as the imperial capital of the Eastern Roman Empire for a millennium and that gave the Ottoman Empire an immutable center of gravity from the mid-fifteenth century until its demise in the 1920s. As for genealogy, the main Safavid claim to legitimacy was religious in nature, based on their presumed descent from Musa al-Kazim, the seventh Imam in Twelver Shi'ism. Like the Mughals, they also considered themselves heirs to the Timurid legacy, most directly via the successor dynasty represented by Sultan Husayn Bayqara (r. 1464-1506) in Herat.¹³ This genealogy included a foundation myth narrated as a dream, not of a tree but of a sun that illuminated the world, as well as the title *sahib-qiran*. The ancestral connection to Timur was not just more tenuous, however, but was also concocted at a later stage, and more particularly under Shah 'Abbas I, possibly to compete with Ottoman pretensions. It was thus even less readily acknowledged by contemporary foreign observers.¹⁴ The result is terminological ambiguity that endures until today in ironic ways: Whereas modern scholars writing in Persian

¹² For the origins and history of the term under Timur Lang, see B. Manz, *The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989): 14-6.

¹³ M. Szuppe, "L'évolution de l'image de Timour et des Timourides dans l'historiographie safavide du seizième au dix-septième siècle." *Cahiers d'Asie Centrale* 2-4, *L'héritage timouride. Iran-Asie central-India, quinzième / dix-huitième siècles* (1997): 316-7.

¹⁴ Ibid.: 317-8; and Sholeh Quinn, *Historical Writing during the Reign of Shah 'Abbas. Ideology, Imitation and Legitimacy in Safavid Chronicles* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 2000): 50. See also Sholeh Quinn, "The Dream of Shaykh Safi al-Din and Safavid Historical Writing." *Iranian Studies* 29 (1996): 127-47.

invariably speak of “Imparaturi-yi ‘Usmani,” the “Ottoman Empire,” they usually call the Safavid state just that, “*dawlat-i Safaviyah*.”

So, after we strip away both contemporary perceptions and current perspectives, does the Safavid state stand up as an empire; did it have any imperial credentials; was it capacious enough and were its claims to sovereignty sufficiently universal for it to qualify as an empire? These are the central questions I propose to address in this essay—in the full knowledge that the very term “empire” is Western in origin and has no direct equivalent in Islamic political philosophy or any Middle Eastern language. I will offer the reasons why I think that question should be answered in the affirmative, albeit with some qualifications, after which I propose to raise a number of issues having to do with the forces that, in my view, tipped the balance toward the cohesion and coherence that enabled the Safavid state to function as an empire in spite of its exiguous economic resources, its many centrifugal forces, and the limitations of its ideological underpinnings. Before concluding, I will return to the stirring days of Shah Isma‘il I (r. 1501-24), marking the beginning of the Safavid dynasty as a political enterprise, to argue that, if its leadership had any imperial ambitions, early on these ran up against inherent limitations as well as reality, long before Safavid Iran culminated as an empire in the early seventeenth century.

I. The Elements of Empire

In a study on the Portuguese *Estado da Índia*, Subrahmanyam addresses the question of what constitutes an empire. Beginning with what he calls a “relatively structuralist orientation,” he lists as criteria for empire status: “elaborate hierarchical systems of administration, extensive military power (and the fiscal mechanisms that go with it), the control over extensive landmasses, a large subject population, and substantial revenues.” He then dismisses these as excluding many pre-modern “empires” of limited resources and complexity. In his desire to include Portugal and its overseas possessions as an empire, Subrahmanyam subsequently settles on what he calls a more minimalist approach, in which empires can be called, 1) those “states with an extensive geographical spread, embracing more than one cultural domain and ecozone; 2) as states powered by an ideological motor that claimed extensive, at times even universal, forms of dominance, rather than the mere control of a compact domain; 3) as states where the idea of suzerainty was a crucial component of political articulation, and the

monarch was defined not merely as king, but as ‘king over kings,’ with an explicit notion of hierarchy in which various levels of sovereignty, both ‘from above’ and ‘from below’ were involved.”¹⁵

The criteria set forth by Subrahmanyam enable him to cast a wide net, creating room for inclusion of less well-known states and maritime-based or non-contiguous states. Even more importantly, the advantage of his definition is that it incorporates ideology as an ineluctable component of the concept of “empire,” so that an empire becomes more than a “political unit that is large and expansionist (or with memories of an expansionist past), reproducing differentiation and inequality among the people it incorporates.”¹⁶

A. *Geographical spread and civilizational diversity*

Using these criteria allows us to assess the imperial status of the Safavid state. True, the vast region over which they wielded power did not encompass the civilizational diversity of the Ottomans with their possessions ranging from the Balkans to the Persian Gulf, from Budapest to Basra, or that of Mughal territory spanning several ecozones between the Himalayas and the Deccan. Yet the Safavids did preside over a vast and variegated territory, stretching, in climatic terms, from the Alpine region of the Caucasus Mountains to the hot, arid zone of the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea. Like the Ottoman and Mughal states, Safavid Iran was a composite state of multiple identities, most of which concerned local and regional affiliation and loyalty. Iran was—and continues to be today—marked by strong local and regional forms of affinity and pride, with people identifying with particular regions—Fars, or Khurasan, or Gilan—or individual cities—Shiraz, Isfahan, Kashan, or Yazd—and evincing mutual suspicion and animosity articulated through perceptions marked by stereotype and prejudice. Accordingly, various outlying areas in Safavid times exhibited a strong sense of political autonomy. Salient examples of regions with distinct forms of identity are the Caspian provinces—Talish, Gilan, and Mazandaran—in the north, ‘Arabistan (modern Khuzistan) in the southwest, and Sistan in the southeast, all of which had long been governed by local dynasties before they became incorporated into, or affiliated with, the Safavid polity.

¹⁵ Subrahmanyam, “Written on Water”: 43.

¹⁶ C. Calhoun, “Introduction.” In *Lessons of Empire: Imperial Histories and American Empire*, eds C. Calhoun, F. Cooper, and K. W. Moore (New York: New Press, 2006): 3.

Compared to the Ottoman Empire with its large number of Christians, and the Mughal state with its vast, mostly Hindu majority, generating what Sheldon Pollock calls a “non-ethnic cosmopolitanism,” Safavid Iran was relatively homogeneous with regard to religious belief: most of its inhabitants professed some form of Islam.¹⁷ Much of this came in the form of heterodox beliefs and folk practices. These gradually gave way to a more mainstream version of Twelver Shi’ism, at least among the urban population, so that by the seventeenth century most of the cities had been converted to Shi’ism. Iran’s non-Muslim minority communities grew in number as the Safavids extended their control to the largely Christian Caucasus. The country’s domestic Armenians formed a sizeable group, if not in numbers, in the disproportionately important role they played in the economy, and Safavid territory counted a fairly large number of Jews, Zoroastrians, and Hindus among its inhabitants as well. Still, the aggregate of Iran’s non-Muslim population did not compare to the vast number of Greeks living in Ottoman lands, let alone of Christians in the entire realm, especially in the Balkan territories.

In its ethnic make-up, the Safavid realm was more heterogeneous than in its religious diversity. The country was populated by Persians, Turks, and Arabs, in addition to a multitude of smaller, less prominent groups such as Baluchis, Kurds, Lurs, Turkmen, Circassians, and Lezghis. Some of these inhabited territory that constituted a tributary fringe to the core Safavid state. Further ethno-religious diversity was introduced with the transfer of large numbers of Armenians and Georgians from their ancestral homelands, which were annexed by Safavid Iran between the mid-sixteenth and the early seventeenth century. Although these so-called slaves, or *ghulams*, were made to adopt Islam, their formal conversion did not necessarily make them lose their ancestral faith, and they certainly did not give up their ethnic distinctiveness in the process. Also, in the course of the sixteenth century, a numerically small but culturally significant number of Arab clerics, mostly from Lebanon and Bahrain, moved to Iran, lured by the prospect of employment, prestige, and privilege. Far from being marginal to state and society, these newcomers came to play a pivotal role in the Safavid state to the point where from the late sixteenth century onward a large segment of the country’s military, administrative, and religious elite were recruited from their ranks.

¹⁷ S. Pollock, “Empire and Imitation.” In *Lessons of Empire*, Calhoun *et al.*: 184.

B. Ideological underpinnings

A consideration of the role of ideology in the status of Safavid Iran as an empire has to begin with the notion of territory. Pace Walther Hinz, it would be wholly anachronistic to label early modern Iran a nation-state in the modern sense of the term.¹⁸ Affinity and loyalty in the Safavid realm rested with kin, clan, and faith rather than with abstract political concepts; political affiliation concerned one's lineage and was at most limited to one's town, region of origin, or residence. This, however, does not diminish the fact that after its consolidation under Shah Isma'īl I, Safavid Iran was a contiguous territorial unit or at a minimum had a clearly defined core territory. The term "Iran," which after an absence of some six centuries had re-entered usage with the Ilkhanid branch of the Mongols, conveyed a shared self-awareness among the political and cultural elite of a geographical entity with distinct territorial and political implications.¹⁹ A core element of the Safavid achievement was the notion that the dynasty had united the eastern and western halves of Iran, Khurasan and Herat, the lands of the Timurids, in the East, and the territory of the Aq-Quyunlu in the West.²⁰ The term *mulk-i vasi' al-faza-yi Iran*, "the expansive realm of Iran," found in the seventeenth-century chronicle, *Khuld-i barin*, and again, in near identical terms, in the travelogue of Muhammad Rabi', Shah Sulayman's envoy to Siam in the 1680s, similarly conveys the authors' pride and self-consciousness with regard to the territory they inhabited or hailed from.²¹ The same term is perhaps the closest Persian-language equivalent to the term "empire" found in the contemporary source material.

¹⁸ See W. Hinz, *Irans Aufstieg zum Nationalstaat im fünfzehnten Jahrhundert* (Berlin and Leipzig: Walter de Gruyter and Co., 1936).

¹⁹ For the reintroduction of the term Iran, see B. G. Fragner, "Historische Wurzeln neuzeitlicher iranischer Identität. Zur Geschichte des politischen Begriffs 'Iran' im späten Mittelalter und in der Neuzeit." In *Studia Semitica Neou Iranica Rudolpho Macuch Septuagenario ab amicis et discipulis dedicata*, eds M. Macuch et al. (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1989): 88-9; and D. Krawulsky, "Zur Wiederbelebung des Begriffes 'Iran' zur Ilhanzeit." In *Das Reich der Ilhane. Eine topographisch-historische Studie* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1978): 11-7.

²⁰ See J. Aubin, "L'avènement des Safavides reconsideré." *Moyen Orient et Océan Indien seizième-dix-neuvième siècles* 5 (1988): 114.

²¹ Muhammad Yusuf Valah Qazvini Isfahani, *Iran dar zaman-i Shah Safi va Shah 'Abbas-i Divvum (Khuld-i barin, rawzah 6, hadiqah 6-7)*, ed. M. R. Nasiri (Tehran: Intisharat-i Danishgah-i Tihiran, 1380/2001): 589; and Muhammad Rabi' b. Muhammad Ibrahim, *Safinah-i Sulaymani (Safarnamah-i safir-i Iran bih Siyam, 1094-1098 A.H.)*, ed. 'Abbas Faruqi (Tehran: Intisharat-i Danishgah-i Tihiran, 1362/1983): 5.

If “Iran” eluded a precise definition in terms of linear boundaries, the other term employed in Safavid chronicles, *mamalik-i mahrusah*, clearly delineated what it excluded by adding a religious dimension to the notion of a shared territory and polity. Muhammad Mufid Mustawfi Yazdi, the author of the *Mukhtasar-i Mufid*, a geographical compendium written in the 1670s, brings this out in unambiguous ways. He offers a detailed enumeration of the many constituent parts of the *mamalik-i mahrusah*, the (divinely) protected domains that made up Iran in his eyes. Mustawfi Yazdi wrote his work while residing in India and it was in part intended as a challenge to India’s self-identification as a great empire. His self-consciousness in presenting the country as a political unit is unmistakable. He conceives of a “greater Iran,” a geographical area that includes all of Mesopotamia—territory that in reality had been lost to the Ottomans in 1638. Writing at a time when orthodox Shi‘ism was in the ascendant at the Safavid court, he privileges the core Shi‘i areas, giving ‘Iraq-i Arab, or Mesopotamia, the site of the shrines of the Shi‘i founding fathers, pride of place. He closes with the Persian Gulf coast, a region that had only come under Safavid control under Shah ‘Abbas I, two generations earlier, and that until modern times was most alienated from the Persian heartland and least effectively controlled by the central government because of its distinct climate and culture as well as its orientation toward the Indian Subcontinent and the Arab lands across the water.²²

An enumeration of unifying factors in Safavid Iran ought to highlight the entwined notion of territory and faith even more explicitly than Mustawfi does. The “territorialization of faith” after all stands out as the Safavids’ greatest political accomplishment.²³ Their conquest of Iran in the early sixteenth century marked the beginning of an overlapping of land and religion that has characterized the country ever since. Twelver Shi‘ism, the branch of Islam they imposed on Iran, was to become the most compelling ideological instrument in the expansion of their state. A minority variant of Islam bound up with the very origins of the Safavid realm as a state, Shi‘ism was well suited to endow the Iranian state with a strong sense of unity through particularism—in ways that do not apply to either the Ottomans or the Mughals. The Ottomans had risen to prominence under

²²) *Mohtasar-e Mofid des Mohammad Mofid Mostoufi*, ed. Seyfeddin Najmabadi, 2 vols (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1989-91): 1-12.

²³) This term is used by B. Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1983): 24.

the banner of Islam, but they only gained prestige as the champions of its Sunni variant in the early sixteenth century, when they became the protectors of the two holy shrines of Islam and simultaneously saw themselves confronted with the strident Shi'ism of their eastern neighbors. Sunni Islam served as their "state religion" but it was not a beleaguered minority faith, so there was no need for Istanbul to proclaim it as urgently as in the case of Shi'i Islam in Iran. Ottoman Islam was, in Karen Barkey's words, "important to the identity of 'empire,' but more as a self-consciously constructed and strategically displayed one, rather than an overriding distinctiveness that made the Ottomans clearly different than others."²⁴ In Mughal official policy, too, (Sunni) Islam played a different role. Mughal rulers had to deal with a largely non-Muslim population holding beliefs and engaging in practices radically different from Islam. They did so in numerous ways. Various forms of receptiveness to other creeds going as far as open syncretism were the norm, famously expressed and propagated by Akbar and, less explicitly, by his successor, Sultan Jahangir (r. 1605-1627).²⁵ Even the bigotry espoused by Sultan Aurangzeb (r. 1658-1707) was followed by a (pragmatic) return to toleration. Following Aurangzeb's death, Zu'l Fiqar Khan, reviving the "liberal" tradition of Akbar, sought to co-opt non-Muslim and peripheral groups by abolishing the *jizya* in 1712 and by making concessions to the Rajputs and the Marathas.²⁶

Persian culture, its legacy, and its continued production, played an even more vital part in the overarching Iranian sense of self, to the point where Safavid Iran may be called an incarnation of the age-old Iranian "empire of the mind," in Michael Axworthy's apt phrase.²⁷ So strong was the gravitas of Persianate culture, that, in spite of their vastly greater material resources, the Mughals deferred to Safavid Iran; and, in conditions not dissimilar to that of the British in modern America, Iranians moving to the Subcontinent readily found employment at the Mughal court on account of their presumed cultural sophistication. Its most important component, the Persian language, was crucial as a medium tying together the diverse groups inhabiting the country, both as a vehicle of communication and as a cultural repository. Of course, Iran was multilingual; as they continue to do

²⁴ Barkey, *Empire of Difference*: 104.

²⁵ Harbans Mukhia, *The Mughals of India* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2004): 19ff.

²⁶ Satish Chandra, *Parties and Politics at the Mughal Court, 1707-1740* (Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 2002): 125.

²⁷ M. Axworthy, *A History of Iran. Empire of the Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 2008).

today, the country's inhabitants spoke a number of different languages, from Persian and Kurdish to Turkish and Arabic. Paradoxically, Safavid shahs usually conversed in Turkish. But Persian was the mother tongue of the country's urban elite and the core political and administrative language of the entire realm. Persian was also the language of culture, above all of poetry—as it was for the entire area between the Balkans and the Deccan—where it functioned as a *lingua franca*.²⁸ In the seventeenth century Persian began to replace Arabic on the coinage and even gained in importance in the Safavid religious sphere, edging out Arabic as the language of religious thought and ideology, as more and more clerics began to write their works in Persian so as to appeal to larger segments of the population. Persian thus played a role in Iran that was different from that of Turkish in the Ottoman Empire but was similar to its position at the Mughal court—although not in Mughal territory. In Istanbul, Turkish was the language of the court as well as of the administrative apparatus. But as a cultural language, it had to cede primacy to Persian. Ottoman annalists wrote their chronicles in Turkish, yet the Ottoman sultan famously composed poetry in Persian. In Mughal India, Persian was the language of the king, the royal household, and the high elite, though not of any subordinate societal group. Indian Sufi thought expressed itself almost exclusively in Persian. And as in Iran (and Central Asia), all historiography in Mughal India was *persophone*.²⁹

Safavid literature and especially poetry, the supreme expression of the Persian language, linked the past, including the pre-Islamic past, to the present and served as a shared cultural repertoire, not just for the elite but for the common people as well, at least in urban areas. Iran's national epic, Firdawsi's *Shahnamah* in particular connected a mythological pre-Islamic Iranian past, filled with heroic kings engaged in the eternal struggle between good and evil, to the Islamic, Safavid present with its own potent symbols of justice and redemption. One did not have to be educated or even literate to partake of this cultural repository. Stories from the *Shahnamah* had a place in the public sphere: they were recited in urban coffeehouses and during festivals and other public gatherings—a place that they retained

²⁸ For this, see B. Fagner, *Die 'Persophonie.' Regionalität, Identität und Sprachkontakt in der Geschichte Asiens* (Berlin: ANOR, 1999).

²⁹ See Muzaffar Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam in India c. 1200-1800* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004): 127.

until quite recently.³⁰ This connection is reflected in name-giving as well. Beginning in the sixteenth century, the Safavids, seeking to curtail the power and influence of the unruly tribal Turkman forces, introduced a new service elite without tribal ties consisting of Armenian, Georgian, and Circassian “slaves.” As said, these *ghulams* were given high-ranking positions in the military and the administration following their formal conversion to Islam. With a new identity came a new name. Many were named Rustam or Khusraw, names from the *Shahnamah* with links to the ancient mythical past.³¹

C. *The status and role of the ruler*

The issues of ideology and ruler status, inextricably linked in the Safavid case, were contributing factors not just to the idea of an expansive realm but also to that of an empire with universal ambitions. Here we might distinguish between “horizontal” spatial aspirations, and a “vertical,” diachronic dimension. Safavid rulers, or at least the early ones, did have grand territorial ambitions, though neither Shah Isma‘il nor Shah ‘Abbas I were driven by the kind of messianic imperialism that moved contemporary rulers like Philip II of Spain or Portugal’s Manuel I.³² This is reflected, among other things, in the titulature found in the sources. One of the shah’s titles was *‘alam-panah*, or *jahan-panah*, “refuge of the world,” or *padishah-i ‘alam*, “ruler of the world.” According to Engelbert Kaempfer, the rulers of Safavid Iran and Mughal India competed over who rightfully could carry that title.³³ The other term used, in fact the ultimate term applied to the Safavid shah in some of the court chronicles, is that of *sahib-qiran*. Until the fifteenth century, only three previous rulers in history had

³⁰ For this, see K. Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs: Cultural Landscapes of Early Modern Iran* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002): XXIX.

³¹ See K. Babayan, “The Safavid Household Reconfigured: Concubines, Eunuchs and Military Slaves.” In *Slaves of the Shah: New Elites of Safavid Iran*, eds S. Babaie et al. (London: I. B. Tauris, 2004): 37.

³² For Philip II, see G. Parker, “David or Goliath? Philip II and his World in the 1580s.” In *Spain, Europe and the Atlantic World: Essays in Honour of John H. Elliot*, eds R. L. Kagan and G. Parker (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 259. For Manuel, see L. F. F. R. Thomaz, “L’idée impériale Manuéline.” In *La découverte, le Portugal et l’Europe, Actes du colloque, Paris le 26, 27 et 28 mai 1988*, eds J. Aubin and A. Pinheiro Marques (Paris: Fondation Calouste Gulbenkian, 1990): 35-100.

³³ E. Kaempfer, *Am Hofe des persischen Grosskönigs 1684-1685*, trans. W. Hinz (Tübingen-Basel: Horst Erdmann, 1977): 23-4.

been deemed worthy of that title, Alexander the Great, Chingiz Khan, and Timur Lang. The employment of the epithet suggests that, at least in the dynasty's formative stage as a political ruling house, Safavid aspirations extended beyond (religious) particularism. In Sholeh Quinn's words, Safavid chroniclers over time forged a connection with the Mongols and the Timurids to establish a universal claim to rule—which is precisely the reason why the title *sahib-qiran* occurs in their writings as late as the reign of Shah 'Abbas.³⁴

The strongest elements of universalism, civilizational in nature, are found in the "vertical" claims, those connecting the present to the (remote and even mythical) past. In his mystical poetry, Shah Isma'il famously referred to himself in multiple ways, as Faridun, Khusraw, Jamshid, and Zuhak, Zal's son (Rustam), and Alexander, covering the pantheon of pre-Islamic Iranian heroes. Isma'il connected this mostly mythical past to the monotheistic tradition by adding 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, the first Imam and symbol of Shi'i Islam, as well as the prophet of Christianity, Jesus.³⁵ He thus established a link between Iran's pre-Islamic past and its Islamic present, in ways reminiscent of the *Shahmamah*. This connection was reinforced by the fabrication of a genealogy that hitched pre-Islamic Iran to Shi'ism by way of a presumed marriage between Shahrbanu, the (fictitious) daughter of Yazdegird III (r. 631-52), the last Sasanian ruler, and Husayn, Imam 'Ali's son and heir.

A critically important ideological role must be accorded to the person of the Safavid monarch, the shah. The notion of kingship in conjunction with the actual dynasty and the way it came to power occupied a pivotal place in the Safavid sense of self. The Safavids rose to power as a millenarian movement which in its ascendance relied on the military support of Turcoman warriors, the fiercely loyal and devoted Qizilbash, who served as their shock troops. Theirs was a variant on the collaboration between warrior and priest according to Ibn Khaldun's theory of successful empire-building which had applied to the Almoravids and the Almohads in eleventh and twelfth-century North Africa as much as it would fire up the Wahhabis in the Arabian Peninsula three centuries after the rise of the Safavids. Yet the Safavid case combined the warrior and the holy man in

³⁴ Quinn, *Historical Writing*: 28, 49-50, 52. See also, Szuppe, "Timour et les Timourides": 324.

³⁵ V. Minorsky, "The Poetry of Shah Isma'il I." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 10 (1942): 1006-53.

one person. Shah Isma‘il, the first Safavid ruler to hold territorial power, was a charismatic king of transcendent stature whose career represented a remarkable merger of the ancient Iranian concept of kingship and Twelver Shi‘ism’s millenarian, redemptive impulse. His subjects famously revered him as an incarnation of the divine. The humiliating defeat against the Ottomans at the Battle of Chaldiran left many to wonder about the direct link between the shah and the heavenly realm, though not enough to end the association. Isma‘il’s successor, Shah Tahmasb (r. 1524–76) continued to be venerated as a god-like figure to the point where people would reverently kiss the doors of his palace and considered any water the shah had touched a cure against fever.³⁶

In a strangely paradoxical way, an unusual degree of royal visibility and accessibility at the Safavid court—of a level not seen in either Istanbul or Agra—did nothing to detract from this exalted status. Even after assuming political power, the Safavids retained many features of their steppe-based warrior-band origins, including various forms of direct interaction with their subjects and their guests. Shah ‘Abbas I and his successors routinely invited Western missionaries, diplomats, and travelers to join them and their boon companions in gatherings around food and drink which also served as a forum for disputation on religious and philosophical matters. The most charismatic of the Safavid rulers, Shah ‘Abbas, commanded absolute, divinely sanctioned sovereignty, but was also accessible, personally presiding over audiences for commoners several times a week, and even casual, famously mingling with his subjects in informal settings. As late as the reign of Shah ‘Abbas II (1642–66), it was possible for ordinary people to grab the reins of the ruler’s horse and hand him their petitions before he set out on his morning ride. The Safavids did not generate an Ottoman-like style of formal individualized royal portraits; instead, the period’s paintings involving the court typically show the shah in a convivial or ceremonial setting, surrounded by courtiers or diplomats.³⁷ Royal accessibility decreased in the course of the seventeenth century, yet Safavid shahs retained their divine aura until the last days of the dynasty, even as

³⁶ Vincenzo Alessandri, “Report to Venetian Senate, 24 Sept. 1572.” In *La repubblica di Venezia e la Persia*, ed. G. Berchet (Tehran: Offset Press, 1976): 178.

³⁷ Gülru Necipoğlu, “The Serial Portraits of Ottoman Sultans in Comparative Perspective.” In *The Sultan’s Portrait: Picturing the House of Osman*, ed. A. Orbay (Istanbul: Türkiye İş Bankası, 2000): 22–61; and S. Babaie, *Isfahan and its Palaces: Statecraft, Shi‘ism and the Architecture of Conviviality in Early Modern Iran* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008). Thanks to Kishwar Rizvi for bringing the first source to my attention.

some clerics began to criticize them for personal behavior unbecoming to Muslim rulers. It is tempting to think that this aura—charismatic, divinely inspired, imperial—helps explain why no Safavid ruler was ever deposed and that, with the possible but unproven exception of Shah Isma‘il II (d. 1578), none was ever assassinated. Compare this to the Ottoman state, where one sultan, Osman, was killed in 1622 and seven out of fourteen of his successors were ousted in the next two centuries.³⁸

II. Imperial Heights: The Reign of Shah ‘Abbas I

The reign of Shah ‘Abbas I (1587-1629) is commonly considered the height of Safavid Iran as an empire. His posthumous reputation has been that of a visionary ruler who brought his realm to territorial greatness, economic prosperity, and international prominence through a set of forward-looking policies designed to optimize military strength, centralize state control, and expand Iran’s internal and international commercial ambit.

This image is most visibly embodied in Shah ‘Abbas’s architectural legacy with its blend of religious, civic, and commercial elements, as well as in his well-known pursuit of a multifaceted economic strategy. The shah projected a “religiously sanctioned imperial image” in the ways he patronized, renovated, and embellished, first the Safavid ancestral shrine in Ardabil and later the sanctuary of the Eighth Imam in Mashhad.³⁹ On a much grander scale, he selected a new, centrally located capital, Isfahan, within a few years after coming to power in 1587-8. A decade later, the city was on its way to becoming a showcase of Safavid dynastic power and wealth, a tangible as well as a symbolic expression of imperial aspirations, with its newly laid-out commercial and administrative center at the heart of which stood the royal square, appropriately called *maydan-i naqsh-i jahan* or “square of the image of the world.”

Shah ‘Abbas’s commercial policy had yet other imperial overtones, if not in design, certainly in outcome. The Persian annalistic sources, which pay scant attention to issues of trade and agriculture, do not offer explicit references to the intent behind the royal solicitation of trade. And it certainly

³⁸ N. Vatin and G. Veinstein, *Le sérail ébranlé. Essai sur les morts, dépositions et avènements des sultans ottomans quatorzième-dix-neuvième siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2003): 60-4.

³⁹ Kishwar Rizvi, “The Imperial Setting: Shah ‘Abbās at the Shrine of Shaykh Safti in Ardabil.” In *Safavid Art and Architecture*, ed. S. R. Canby (London: The British Museum Press, 2002): 14.

would be rash to argue that a grand strategy beyond maximizing profits and enriching the royal treasury lay behind 'Abbas's commercial designs. Yet, regardless of his primary motives, the shah's policies had the effect of knitting a vast and disparate territory together by way of facilitating the movement of people and goods. By selecting Isfahan as his capital and building it up as a well-endowed political and economic center, he gave his realm a centrally located commercial nexus. The numerous new *caravanserai*s constructed throughout Iran during the shah's reign facilitated trade and travel. And Shah 'Abbas famously enhanced road safety, ensuring that merchants, irrespective of origin, status, or ethnicity, were reimbursed for losses suffered due to theft and robbery.

Shah 'Abbas's policies vis-à-vis Iran's southern littoral and in particular his settlement of ports on the Persian Gulf, finally, betray grand ambitions as well. In this case, too, one hesitates to attach the label "imperial" to the intent, which does not seem to have gone beyond securing stability and attaining a measure of control needed for the maximization of profits from the seaborne trade. For two decades after capturing Bahrain, important for the trade in pearls and horses to India, from the Portuguese in 1602, he pursued various policies designed to undermine their position elsewhere in the Gulf. In 1614 he took over Mughistan, including the port of Gamru, soon to be renamed Bandar 'Abbas. These efforts culminated in 1622 in the expulsion of the Portuguese from the isle of Hormuz with the assistance of the English, whom the shah had earlier welcomed as participants in the growing trade of the Persian Gulf and as a counterweight to the Portuguese. A year after his recovery of Hormuz, 'Abbas enlisted the Dutch as yet another countervailing force, giving them trading rights (as well as obligations), and prodding them to provide naval support for his land-based army.

Shah 'Abbas's forays into ethnically alien territory, his conquests of the southern Caucasus, and his complex settlement policy, combining haphazardness and careful planning, reflect aspirations that seem more imperial in design. In keeping with long-standing Near Eastern custom, the shah habitually transplanted tribal and ethnic groups around the country for the purpose of breaking up existing tribal loyalties and defending external borders. As the Italian traveler Pietro della Valle put it, 'Abbas's way of moving people around his realm was aimed at securing borderlands but also represented a deliberate attempt at harnessing its economic resources. The shah had difficulty recruiting people from the underpopulated Ottoman frontier zone; he saw the Uzbeks on the borders of Khurasan as too

unruly and religiously unreliable; and long distances and a perceived lack of martial values worked against recruiting people from India. He therefore opted for Georgians and Armenians, both vulnerable and perceived as useful, to fill the ranks of the military and the bureaucracy.⁴⁰ The Georgians, known for their military prowess, were mostly drafted into the army and the administration. The Armenians, who enjoyed a reputation for industriousness, were mobilized for commercial purposes as well. In 1604, during one of the wars he fought with the Ottomans, the shah removed a large contingent of Armenians from their homeland on the northern Aras River in Azerbaijan and resettled them in a newly built suburb of Isfahan, where they were given commercial privileges, including a leading role in the silk export monopoly that 'Abbas instituted in 1617, as well as a measure of religious freedom.

III. Coherence through Inclusion and Accommodation

Shah 'Abbas's choice of Isfahan as his capital, his commercial strategy, and his settlement policy were not the only countervailing forces to the many centrifugal forces that tore at the Safavid polity. There were other, more structural centripetal ones that contributed to a sense of overarching unity and coherence. What were some of the ingredients of cohesion that Shah 'Abbas inherited and further developed, enabling the Safavid state to exert a modicum of control over a diverse and variegated land and to ensure dynastic continuity for another century?

The most important of these is perhaps the remarkable capacity for inclusiveness exhibited by the Safavids—a trait they shared with the Ottomans and the Mughals.⁴¹ This begins with ethnicity, an exceedingly fluid concept and not a noticeable consideration in the granting of bureaucratic rank and prestige. Thus there was no expectation that the ruling class, or even the shah himself, would have to be from a particular ethnic background. Indeed, the successive dynasties that ruled Iran into the modern age have predominantly been of a Turko-Mongol background. Throughout Iran's pre-modern and early modern history, "state and monarchy weren't ethnically based institutions," and rulers could be of any ethnic

⁴⁰ Pietro della Valle, *Delle condizioni di Abbas re di Persia* (Tehran: Offset Press, 1976): 79-82.

⁴¹ As amply discussed with regard to the Ottomans in Barkey, *Empire of Difference*.

origins or from any dynasty provided that they promoted the country's culture and territorial integrity.⁴²

Among the many other factors that made the Safavid state function and endure for as long as it did, was its pragmatic way of exercising power across space which played a key role, and often made the shah deviate from his habit of treating recalcitrant officials mercilessly and led him to forgive and accommodate them. Royal authority rested in part on *siyasat*, summary and severe punishment for disobedience and dissent. If ethnic background and religious profile were not determining qualifications for high rank and prestige, loyalty to the person of the ruler was. Such loyalty was the *sine qua non* of continued employment for any administrative official or provincial magistrate, periodically reiterated and reinforced by way of presents and supplicatory visits to the court. Swift reprisal in the form of dismissal and, usually, death typically awaited those who broke this unwritten contract. Such harsh treatment was expected to the point where the Frenchman Jean Chardin claimed that the Iranians saw and accepted their rulers as inherently violent.⁴³ But *siyasat* was mitigated by the equally strong imperative of *musamahah* or *mudara*, leniency and accommodation. In a policy of pragmatic inclusiveness, flexibility manifested itself in a pattern of circularity in the practice of dismissal and reappointment. The pattern varied with the character of the ruler, but at all times officials who fell out of grace might be rehabilitated and managed to regain their former rank and prestige following a period of disgrace and imprisonment.⁴⁴ Even assets confiscated at the time of discomfiture would often be returned to them in part or even in full.⁴⁵ This practice served several purposes, one of which was that of co-opting adversaries and wayward officials. This was less a matter of royal kindness than a calculated strategy based on a realization that coming down too hard on local rulers with their own regional powerbase was to invite great resentment and eventually wholesale rebellion. An extreme, though by no means unique, example is Shah 'Abbas's way of dealing with 'Ali Khan, the ruler of Biya Pas, the western half of the

⁴² Hamid Ahmadi, "Unity within Diversity: Foundations and Dynamics of National Identity in Iran." *Critique: Critical Middle East Studies* 14 (2005): 135.

⁴³ J. Chardin, *Voyages du chevalier Chardin, en Perse, et autres lieux de l'Orient*, vol. 5, ed. L. Langlès (Paris: Le Normant, 1810-1): 219.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*: 286.

⁴⁵ One understands Chardin's amazement at the appointment of Muhammad-Quli Khan, who had been exiled by Shah 'Abbas II for thirteen years, to the sensitive position of khan of the frontier region of Qandahar. See Chardin, *Voyages*, vol. 10: 110-1.

refractory region of Gilan, who rebelled three times against the central government. 'Abbas, otherwise known for dealing resolutely with rebellious underlings, forgave him each time.⁴⁶

Accommodation in turn was related to social mobility. The hierarchical division of power was rigid in theory but much less so in practice. Elite recruitment tended to be limited and circular but the political system did leave room for talent and ambition to be parlayed into influence, even high rank.⁴⁷ Many highly placed officials hailed from (relatively) humble backgrounds or from peripheral parts of the country, even if most of those who rose to important positions came from families that had close connections to the center of power. This was in part a function of the much-noted absence of a fixed "nobility," in part the outcome of a personalized power structure and the premium it put on merit.

Latitudinarianism is of course the hallmark of all early modern societies, especially non-Western ones. Rather remarkable (and paradoxical) in the case of the Safavids is that pragmatic tolerance coexisted in relative harmony with the emphatically religious underpinnings of the state including the exclusionary tendencies inherent in Shi'ism's status as its official creed. Insofar as all empires are self-centered and tend to view themselves as the pinnacle of civilization defending themselves against barbarians knocking on the gates, the Safavids had a rather clear sense of who belonged and who did not, who was in and who was out. Inclusion and exclusion followed self-proclaimed civilizational and political rather than strictly religious categories. Thus Central Asian peoples such as the Uzbeks, let alone non-Muslim peoples like the Kalmuks, could never hope to be included in the ranks of the civilized. But empires, if they are to have a sense of purpose, also have to embrace and assimilate the various peoples who fall

⁴⁶ Mahmud b. Hidayat Allah Afushtah-i Natanzi, *Naqavat al-asar fi zikr al-Akhyar*, ed. Ihsan Ishraqi (Tehran: Intisharat-i 'Ilmi va Farhangi, 1373/1994): 541ff. So striking was the leniency with which bureaucratic misbehavior was met under Shah Sultan Husayn that at least one European observer saw it as one of the causes of the country's ills. See C. de Bruyn, *Reizen over Moskoviië, door Perzië, en Indië* (Amsterdam: Goeree, 1711): 176.

⁴⁷ Contemporary foreign observers noted the absence of a "nobility" along Western feudal lines among the Iranian elite—drawing attention to the attendant lack of titles and attributes—and ascribed the remarkable rise of commoners to the absence of a fixed hierarchy among social groups. See, for example, Raphaël du Mans, "Estat de la Perse." In *Raphaël du Mans, missionnaire en Perse au dix-septième siècle, vol. 2*, ed. F. Richard (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1995) 95-6. This is, of course, a main feature of Weber's analysis of patrimonial rule as well.

under their sway. The Safavids, of course, never went as far as the Romans did in this regard, but even without the acquisition of (non-existent) citizenship, outsiders could become consummate insiders, as is exemplified by the incorporation of the *ghulams*, mostly Georgians and Armenians, who, rising from a position of marginality, were put to use as administrators, royal merchants, and envoys, and as such played a pivotal role in the running of the country. The empire even left room for inherently marginal, “unwashed” outsiders. Thus Kurds and Arabs living in the borderlands with the Ottoman Empire, Lezghis controlling the fastnesses of the Caucasus, or Baluchis inhabiting the frontier regions of the southeast, were and remained liminal, scorned for their lack of sophistication and trustworthiness. Yet inasmuch as they saw these mostly martial peoples as useful for the protection of the heartland, the Safavid state pragmatically included them, making them patrol the marches by way of tributary arrangements.⁴⁸

Nor did the emphatically Shi‘i character of the Safavid polity exclude a role for Sunnism. It is not just that even in the early eighteenth century fully one-third of the country’s entire population reportedly still adhered to the Sunni faith.⁴⁹ At the same time that they discriminated against their own Sunni subjects, the Safavids tolerated the existence of Sunni sentiments not just in their midst, but at the very highest echelons of bureaucratic power. From the sixteenth century until the last days of the dynasty’s rule, the administration was periodically led by grand viziers of Sunni conviction—men who were crypto-Sunni or even openly Sunni. This reflected the prevailing practice of religious toleration, but insofar as some of these officials hailed from frontier regions, it was arguably a matter of co-optation as well, of giving peripheral regions a stake in the Safavid enterprise. Mirza Makhdum Khan, known for his Sunni beliefs, occupied the highest religious position at the court, the *sadarat*, under Shah Tahmasb, a fastidious ruler famous for his strict devotion to Shi‘ism. Shah Sulayman, who in 1666 mounted the throne at a time when literalist clerical forces were in the ascendant at the court, was assisted by Shaykh ‘Ali Khan as grand vizier

⁴⁸ For repeated references to Baluchis as treacherous and unclean, see Mulla Muhammad Mu‘min Kirmani, *Sabifat al-Irshad (Tarikh-i Afshar-i Kirman—Payan-i kar-i Safaviyah)*, ed. Muhammad Ibrahim Bastani-Parizi (Tehran: Nashr-i ‘Ilm, 1384/2005): *passim*.

⁴⁹ The figure of one-third of Iran’s population as adhering to the Sunni belief is given by the Ottoman ambassador Ahmad Durri Efendi, who visited Iran in 1720. See A. Durri Efendi, *Relation de Dourry Efendy, ambassadeur de la Porte Ottomane auprès du roy de Perse*, ed. L. Langlès (Paris: Ferra, 1810): 54.

for all but eight years of his reign. Shaykh 'Ali Khan was both a Kurd and widely known as a crypto-Sunni. Fath 'Ali Khan, finally, hailed from Daghistan and openly professed his Sunni convictions while serving Shah Sultan Husayn, a ruler known for his religious zeal, as chief minister and trusted servant between 1715 and 1720, which coincided with the rapid breakdown of security and central control in the Safavid state. Fath 'Ali Khan's beliefs were the object of much rumor and slander and played a role in his demise, to be sure, though not in any decisive way.⁵⁰

IV. Universal Aspirations versus Reality

The foregoing discussion has addressed the various characteristics that endowed Safavid Iran with an imperial aura—an aura that arguably culminated with Shah 'Abbas I. The Safavid state retained many of these for decades to come, and Iranian society struck most visitors as stable until the turn of the eighteenth century, when rapid disintegration set in. Most notably, Iran's institutions continued to exhibit remarkable forms of flexibility and plasticity in their capacity to integrate disparate elements into a monarchical, Shi'i inspired, Persianate framework.

Yet for all of their achievements, the Safavid call remained limited in its resonance. It may even be said that Safavid Iran reached its farthest ideological-cum-territorial perimeters early on, and never managed to break out of these. As for ideology, Twelver Shi'ism over time had learned to sublimate its multiple defeats and disappointments by nurturing its underdog status, turning this into a redemptive ideology. There is no a priori reason why in the hands of a determined Shah Isma'il, revolutionary Shi'ism appealing to the underprivileged might not have expanded far beyond Iran—and certainly far into Anatolia and Central Asia, both targets of early Safavid military forays. In truth, Safavid claims only resonated in southern India—far beyond Iran's military reach. In their correspondence with various Safavid shahs, from Isma'il I to 'Abbas I, the Twelver

⁵⁰ For Mirza Makhdum Khan, see R. Stanfield-Johnson, "Mirza Makhdum Khan Sharifi: A Sixteenth-Century Sadr at the Safavid Court." Ph.D. dissertation (New York University, 1992). For Shaykh 'Ali Khan, see R. Matthee, "Administrative Stability and Change in Late Seventeenth-Century Iran: The Case of Shaykh 'Ali Khan." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 26 (1994): 77-98. For Fath 'Ali Khan Daghistani, see R. Matthee, "Blinded by Power: The Rise and Fall of Fath 'Ali Khān Dāghestānī Grand Vizier under Shāh Soltān Hoseyn Safavī (1127/1715-1133/1720)." *Studia Iranica* 33 (2004): 179-219.

Shi'i rulers of the Deccan states of Golconda and Bijapur acknowledged their subordination to Isfahan, calling themselves "plants nourished by the light of affection and the morning dew" provided by the Safavids, and vassals ruling their territories on behalf of the shah.⁵¹ Yet, rather than signaling a literal desire for vassal status, this voluntary submission was at least in part designed as an insurance policy against the growing Mughal threat coming from the north, and aimed at projecting a spiritual rather than a territorial relationship revolving around a common Shi'i belief system. In any case, Isfahan did not reciprocate. The letters Shah 'Abbas wrote in response do not suggest a master giving orders to his provincial underlings. More importantly, there is nothing in the Iranian narrative sources that points to the inclusion of the Deccan in the self-fashioning of the Safavids.⁵²

The failure of Isma'il and his successors to make their ideology reverberate in adjacent lands is clearly linked to Iran's circumscribed military power—which in turn is a function of the country's comparatively small population, limited resource base, and tribal makeup. The mostly barren mountains and sparsely populated deserts surrounding the Iranian plateau also offered meager economic-fiscal prospects, limiting the expansionist impulse even further. Nor can one ignore the exceedingly violent, alienating ways in which the religion was imposed on the country's urban population. Shah Isma'il's conquest of Isfahan in 1503 is said to have involved the killing of 5,000.⁵³ When the same ruler conquered Fars in the same year, he had 4,000 members of the Kaziruni Sufi sect exterminated.⁵⁴ His

⁵¹ See C. Mitchell, "Sister Shia States? Safavid Iran and the Deccan in the Sixteenth Century." *Deccan Studies* 2 (2004): 61. The ruler of Bijapur, Ibrahim 'Adil Shah II, in 1612-3 even wrote a letter to Shah 'Abbas I in which he declared that the "Deccan territories form as much a part of the Safawi empire as the provinces of 'Iraq, Fars, Khurasan, and Azerbaijan," adding that "accordingly, the names of the Safawi monarchs have been recited in the (Friday) sermons and will continue to be recited in future." See Riazul Islam, *A Calendar of Documents on Indo-Persian Relations, vol. 2 (1500-1750)* (Tehran: Iranian Culture Foundation; Karachi: Institute of Central and West Asian Studies, 1982): 131-7 (131); and Nazir Ahmad, "Adil Shahi Diplomatic Missions to the Court of Shah Abbas." *Islamic Culture* 43 (1969): 145.

⁵² Ahmad, "Adil Shahi Diplomatic Mission": 147-8.

⁵³ António Tenreiro, *Itinerários da Índia a Portugal por terra*, ed. António Baião (Coimbra: Impr. da Universidade, 1923): 20-1.

⁵⁴ J. Aubin, "Šāh Ismā'il et les notables de l'Iraq persan." *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 2 (1959): 58.

seizure of Baghdad in 1508 similarly involved the massacre of thousands of the city's Sunni inhabitants.⁵⁵

At the risk of presenting a circular argument, one might say that Shi'ism's very capacity to endow Safavid Iran with an urban-based proto-national sense of identity from the outset turned it into a boundary-setting ideology directed against its neighbors—most of them tribal and all of them Sunni. These ranged from the Lezghis of the eastern Caucasus to the Uzbeks of Khurasan, to the Afghan and Baluchi tribes scattered around the vast deserts of Kirman, Sistan, and beyond—with the Ottomans and the Mughals looming in the background on either side. As early as 1512, Shah Isma'il, in the words of Saïd Amir Arjomand, implicitly gave up on a “millennial world revolution” and settled on “Shi'ism in one country” as part of his post-revolutionary consolidation.⁵⁶ The resounding defeat the Safavids suffered against the Ottomans in the battle of Chaldiran two years later reinforced this trend by making Iran's imperial aspirations founder on the stark reality of military inferiority. At Chaldiran, the sense of self-evident success, indeed the illusion of invincibility that had marked the early project, was badly dented. Isma'il famously never led an army into battle again in the ten remaining years of his reign.

Shah Isma'il's death in 1524 inaugurated a further retrenchment of the Safavid millenarian drive. Under Shah Tahmasb, the shah's aura as an incarnation of the divine came to be overshadowed by his role as custodian of the faith. Shah Tahmasb has been described as a ruler presiding over a vast, divinely protected realm in transition from “frontier state to empire.”⁵⁷ Yet the expansionist drive had lost its momentum. The Ottomans were the aggressors in the various wars fought over Iraq during his reign. Shah Tahmasb's scorched-earth policy in eastern Anatolia meanwhile was designed less to conquer those lands than to deprive the Ottomans of a staging ground for attacks on Iran's interior. And the Peace of Amasya, concluded in 1555, confirmed the notion of “Shi'ism in one country,” making the Ottomans acknowledge the shah's sovereignty over Iran.

⁵⁵ Khurshah b. Qubbad al-Husayni, *Tarikh-i ilchi-yi Nizam Shah (Tarikh-i safaviyah az aghaz ta sal-i 972 hijri qamari)*, eds M. Riza Nasiri and Ku'ichi Haneda (Tehran: Anjuman-i asar va mafakhir-i farhangi, 1379/2000): 35.

⁵⁶ Saïd Amir Arjomand, “The Rise of Shah Esmā'il as a Mahdist Revolution.” *Studies on Persianate Societies* 3 (2005): 58-9.

⁵⁷ C. Mitchell, “The Sword and the Pen: Diplomacy in Early Safavid Iran, 1501-1555.” Ph.D. dissertation (University of Toronto, 2002): 350, 371.

The interim rule of Isma'il II and Khadabandah (1576-1587), which was marked by profound instability and chaos, saw the weakening of central state control and an alarming loss of territory to tribal warlords and external enemies alike. Shah 'Abbas worked hard to regain the lands thus lost and even to revitalize the ideal of territorial expansion beyond the core. Yet, for all 'Abbas's military successes—exemplified by his reconquest of Iraq and his incorporation of Georgia—his reign was marked above all by a “continuing process of religious and national fusion.”⁵⁸ This included the cultivation of Twelver Shi'ism as a mark of religious and political distinction. Shah 'Abbas thus made conscious efforts to turn Mashhad and Qum into sacred centers competing with Mecca and Medina, and, especially the *'atabat*, the Shi'i shrine cities of Iraq.

This process also involved the creation of a new political center located at the heart of the realm. Isfahan, Iran's first capital city in the real sense of the word, reflected the needs and concerns of a stationary rather than a perpetually peripatetic court. It embodied the diminishing status of the quasi-aristocratic Qizilbash, a force desirous to subjugate, willing to fight for a sacred cause, and die in bloody battle, and the ascendance of a series of alternative status groups of a different disposition. Most important among these were the bureaucrats, the “men of the pen,” mainly ethnic Persians, the “new” clerical class, composed of Arab immigrants from Lebanon and Bahrain, and, eventually, the eunuchs who came to dominate court politics in the later seventeenth century. None of these had roots in the old steppe politics and its notions of perpetual war and territorial expansion. By temperament and inclination the first group was given to administrative concerns; the second represented the institutionalized form of religion that came to buttress the new state; the third embodied the insular, self-referential type of court politics that was to mark the later Safavid state. Isfahan's architecture reflects all this: it exudes Shah 'Abbas's imperial vision, yet it is a non-belligerent, non-expansionist vision. The mosques, the royal palace, and the entire lay-out of the royal square bespeak urbane refinement and cultural sophistication rather than raw military power, and in so far as the architecture is religious, it is tempered by civic-mindedness.

⁵⁸) C. Gallagher, *Contemporary Islam: The Plateau of Particularism. Problems of Religion and Nationalism in Iran* (New York: American University Field Staff, 1966): 12.

The final renunciation of the grand warrior dreams came with the definitive loss of Iraq to the Ottomans in 1638, under Shah Safi I (r. 1629-42).⁵⁹ The peace of Zuhab, concluded with Istanbul a year later, froze the western frontier for the remainder of the life span of the Safavids, and thus gave the definitive lie to their universal aspirations. The only noteworthy military victory subsequently won by them was their reconquest of Qandahar in 1648. From that moment on, not respect and prestige, not the urge to be recognized, but self-preservation and ultimately survival came to play a paramount role in the deliberations at the court in Isfahan. Henceforth, the Safavid political elite counted on strategic territorial depth as a defense mechanism. Feeling safe behind the mountains and deserts that surrounded the country on all sides, they viewed the same sparsely populated desert expanses that made life difficult for their own soldiers as a protective shield of the heartland against enemy attack.⁶⁰

This loss of imperial ambition coincided with the erosion of the element most crucial to the management and staying power of empire: the willingness to assimilate difference, and especially religious difference. With the weakening of the (secular) state elite and the concomitant rise of the religious establishment, space for the realm's non-Shi'i constitutive elements narrowed. This "new piety" was neither systematic nor comprehensive in its implementation. It did not even prevent an avowedly Sunni outsider from attaining the grand vizierate in the early eighteenth century. But it did involve renewed pressure on non-Shi'i Muslim groups, mostly peripheral ones, who did not fit a polity increasingly defined in religious terms. Religious forces, released from the curbing effect of a pragmatic and secular-minded shah and his entourage, set out to make the lives of non-Shi'i minorities, including those living in the sensitive border areas, difficult. Much of this was driven by fiscal considerations, to be sure—non-Muslims by definition were easy targets for officials keen to collect new taxes, and various "minority" groups, most notably the Armenians, were active in economic life beyond their numbers. The turn of the eighteenth century

⁵⁹ It is important to note, though, that the reasons why the Safavids were interested in Mesopotamia from the onset were strategic as much as religious in nature. For this, see R. Mathee, "The Safavid-Ottoman Frontier: Iraq-i Arab as seen by the Safavids." *International Journal of Turkish Studies* 9 (2003): 157-74.

⁶⁰ G. de Chinon, *Relations nouvelles du Levant ou traités de la religion, du gouvernement et des coutumes des Perses, des Arméniens, et des Gaures* (Lyon: Thioly, 1671), 69; and Baron Jean-Baptiste de la Maze, *Isfahan to Aleppo*, 7 Nov. 1667, Archives des Missions Etrangères, Paris, Miss. Etrangères M 350: 259-62.

saw intensified clerically led efforts to convert the Sunni population as well as various attempts to reinstate the poll tax or to apply it to those who had hitherto been exempted from it—all of which mightily contributed to the fraying of the texture that made a heterogeneous far-flung state—an empire—a viable and feasible enterprise.⁶¹

Conclusion

This essay has reflected on the use of the term empire and its applicability to the Safavids. If an empire is a powerful, hierarchically organized, ideologically driven, and militarily powerful state spanning several civilizations and ecozones, Safavid Iran might seem to have weaker credentials than the neighboring Ottoman and Mughal states in its imperial claims. The territory controlled by its dynasty was not as large as the Ottoman realm, and for all its splendor and centrality, Isfahan never rivaled Istanbul as the country's single and enduring capital. Iran was neither as productive as the Mughal state, nor as diverse with regard to climate, topography, and ethnicity. But these differences were perhaps quantitative rather than qualitative, a matter of degree and size, rather than of inherent characteristics.

There clearly was an element of old-fashioned dynastic imperialism in the expansionism of Shah Isma'īl I, analogous to the imperialism of Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire dynasty (r. 1526-30), who frequently speaks about his *mulkgirliq*, "kingdom-seizing," ambitions in his memoirs, ridiculing a relative for not possessing such ambitions. He makes clear that *mulkgirlik* goes back to his descent from the Timurids, who seized kingdoms for a living.⁶²

The Safavids, too, initially set out to seize kingdoms for a living. But their endeavor had added value. The grand venture that Safavid Iran represented in its origins and ascending phase was one of imperial, universal aspirations articulated by a charismatic warrior-king who presented himself to his followers and the world at large as divinely appointed and an

⁶¹ For this, and in general for the position of the (Christian) minority in Safavid Iran, see R. Matthee, "Christians in Safavid Iran: Hospitality and Harassment." *Studies in Persianate Societies* 3 (2005): 3-43; and, for the later Safavid period, Yusuf Sharifi, *Dard-i abl-i zim-mah. Nigarishi br zindigi-yi ijtimā'i-yi aqaliyatha-yi mazhabi dar avakhir-i 'asr-i Safavi* (Los Angeles: Ketab Corp., 1387/2009).

⁶² S. Dale, *The Garden of the Eight Paradises: Babur and the Culture of Empire in Central Asia, Afghanistan and India (1483-1530)* (Leiden: Brill, 2004): 94, 153.

incarnation of various constitutive elements of the Iranian tradition. Most importantly, the Safavid state was undergirded by a strong ideology combining the inherited idea of territory—*Iranzamin*—with messianic religious claims and articulated by way of a language that in its expressions embodied the sense of a shared Persianate culture, thus counteracting the extreme diversity of language and culture.

As Patricia Crone says, empires in past times did not inspire any loyalties.⁶³ No one, not even state actors themselves, identified with the state, let alone the (non-existent) nation in the modern sense of the word. Empires did, however, create mechanisms that tied people, or at least, elites together, which created some kind of unity and a sense of collective elite identity out of fragmentation and diversity. They had to, for otherwise they would have been even more ephemeral than most of them proved to be. (Successful and lasting) empires, in other words, were as much a matter of diversity—territorial, cultural, and ethnic—as they were about bridging differences, countering the centrifugal forces inherent in heterogeneity. Safavid Iran's success in accomplishing this enhances its imperial credentials and in part explains the dynasty's staying power in the face of an exiguous population and weak economic resources.

Among these mechanisms was a curious combination of a strongly developed religious self-righteousness and pragmatic forms of ethno-religious tolerance creating a capacious universe for those who did not strictly conform to the ideal. The Safavids dealt with heretical forces with great brutality, but in practice accommodated those on the margins just enough to enable them not just to survive but occasionally to operate near the center of power, to the point where even toward the end the shah had a Sunni grand vizier serve him. Their inclusionary policies served to co-opt potentially rebellious forces and to include adversaries in formal and informal networks.

The imperial characteristics of the Safavids notwithstanding, their aggressive, expansionist phase was as brief as it was explosive, petering out as they were confronted with reality, that is, as the limits of their (military) power came into focus—beginning with their crushing defeat against the Ottomans at Chaldiran in 1514. For the remainder of the dynasty's life span, the Safavids would show a relative lack of external aggressiveness, certainly in their ongoing military confrontation with the Ottomans. This

⁶³ P. Crone, *Pre-Industrial Societies: Anatomy of the Pre-Modern World* (Oxford: One World Press, 2003).

was in part a function of being surrounded by inaccessible mountains and remote deserts and being wedged in between two empires endowed with far greater resources, in part perhaps an inherent feature of a state whose martial origins and *raison d'être* gradually gave way to enduring Persian notions of urbane refinement and sophistication. The architecture of Isfahan as designed by Shah 'Abbas reflects this transition of the Safavids from a wild warrior band to a sedentary, urban-based administrative enterprise. It is civic rather than martial; it lacks in permanent triumphal arches celebrating victory in war; it finds expression in buildings that are slender, pious, and decorative rather than bellicose and forbidding. The columns of the Ali Qapu palace are open and inviting, neither projecting the raw power of the fortresses of Agra and Delhi, nor the secluded inwardness of the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul.⁶⁴

The loss of Iraq to the Ottomans in 1638 signaled Safavid retrenchment as a voluntary act. From that moment onward, the Safavid state folded in upon itself. Its military power, which ever since Chaldiran had ceased to be instinctively aggressive, now became overtly defensive. This reflected the evolution of the Safavid state from a tribal formation built on a thymotic premise—a red-cheeked ethno-religious quest for recognition and respect, represented by a warrior shah surrounded by his ferocious and fiercely loyal Qizilbash troops—to a sedentary polity led by a shah immured in his palace and pursuing consolidation, comfort, and self-preservation. When in 1721-2 Afghan invading tribesmen conducted a deadly assault on the heartland, the mainstay of the new army, the Georgian troops, showed great bravery; they are in fact said to have been the only ones to have put up a fight when Isfahan itself was threatened. Yet, theirs was a fight for survival, and thus a far cry from the grand imperial ambitions of the past.

This loss of prestige, land, and imperial pretensions was a protracted process, to be sure. Even in later times, Safavid shahs continued to be revered as incarnations of the divine by their subjects.⁶⁵ The Safavid dynasty's mystique and mobilizing power also continued to reverberate long after the demise of the actual state in 1722, with almost all successor dynasties claiming legitimacy in their name.⁶⁶ But the process itself is

⁶⁴ For some comparative observations on the differences in palace architecture between the three empires, see G. Necipoğlu, "Framing the Gaze in Ottoman, Safavid and Mughal Palaces." *Ars Orientalis* 23 (1993): 303-42.

⁶⁵ Chardin, *Voyages*, vol. 5: 223.

⁶⁶ For this, see J. Perry, "The Last Safavids." *Iran: Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies* 9 (1971): 59-71.

unmistakable. By late Safavid times, the universal Safavid ideal had come to be seen for what it was—an unrealizable ideal. In what is perhaps a reflection of this new realism, Mustawfi Yazdi in the 1670s embedded the Safavid state in a larger geographical context, which included a number of civilizations surrounding Iran, among them China, the lands of the Mughals, and the Ottoman Empire.⁶⁷

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⁶⁷ Mufid Mustawfi, *Mohtasar-e Mofid*: 11. Hagen, "Ottoman Understandings": 233, refers to "new empirical geography of Katib Çelebi and Ebu Bekr," seventeenth-century Ottoman literati in whose works the "Ottoman Empire no longer occupied the central position in the universe it had maintained before not only on geographical but also historical accounts."

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